

PETROL COMPANY

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**All unambiguous end-of-line hyphens have been removed, and the
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PETROL COMPANY

by
A. L. KIDSON

NEW HISTORY BRANCH
DEPARTMENT OF INTERNAL AFFAIRS
WELLINGTON, NEW ZEALAND
1971

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The authors of the volumes in this series of histories prepared under the supervision of the **War History Branch of the Department of Internal Affairs have been given full access to official documents. They and the Editor-in-Chief are responsible for the statements made and the views expressed by them.**



Petrol Dump in the Western Desert, 1940

Petrol Dump in the **Western Desert, 1940**

PETROL COMPANY

[TITLE PAGE]

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

PETROL COMPANY

A. L. KIDSON

WAR HISTORY BRANCH

DEPARTMENT OF INTERNAL AFFAIRS WELLINGTON, NEW ZEALAND

1961 PRINTED AND DISTRIBUTED BY

PETROL COMPANY

FOREWORD



WINDSOR CASTLE

Foreword

BY

It is truly a pleasure and an honour for me to write the foreword to this history of a fine and efficient unit, the Divisional Petrol Company of the New Zealand Army Service Corps.

The Company went overseas with the First Echelon of the 2nd New Zealand Expeditionary Force in January 1940 and for the first year of the war served in Egypt and the Western Desert, carrying troops, ammunition and supplies 'up the Blue', building petrol dumps and training for the active role that lay ahead. One Section went with the Second Echelon to England, but joined the rest of the Company in Egypt in time to leave with them for Greece. Here the Company ably played its part in carrying the troops forward over mountain roads to their front-line positions, supplying them with petrol and ammunition, and in evacuating them to the beaches in the hazardous withdrawals that followed. In Crete the Company fought as infantry and carried out an unaccustomed role with distinction. At Galatas its men were in the thick of the battle; they suffered heavy casualties and many were left behind at Sfakia as prisoners of war.

In North Africa the Company again fulfilled its specialist role of supplying the Division with petrol, oil and lubricants for its transport,

and it was largely through the untiring efforts of its drivers that the Division was able to carry out the long desert moves that took it from **Alamein** to **Tunis**.

I feel that our greatest contribution to New Zealand's war effort was made in the North African campaigns, a class of warfare for which New Zealanders were ideally suited. Their initiative and technical skill were well demonstrated in the Company's workshops, where its mechanics worked wonders to keep their vehicles moving. New Zealand drivers, in their turn, seemed able almost by instinct to find their way about the trackless desert, nor were they daunted in **Italy** by muddy tracks or mountain roads.

Throughout the war the New Zealand Army Service Corps, of which this unit was an important part, never failed us. I hope this story of the Petrol Company's endeavours will be widely read.

Bernard Fryberg

Deputy Constable and Lieutenant Governor

Windsor Castle

7 October 1960

PETROL COMPANY

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Acknowledgment

THIS is the record of a good job done by Petrol Company 'cobbers'. All have contributed, by their deeds if not their words, and I am proud to have had the writing of the story. To those who have helped me (if only by supplying some quite unprintable anecdote) go my sincere thanks.

Since snares in the path of the amateur historian are many and horrific, a special hand must go to the staff of the War History Branch of the New Zealand Department of Internal Affairs for their patient surveillance and unremitting aid. Their knowledge of our Division, down to its last minutia, is truly encyclopaedic, and has had to be relied on, all along the way, to keep me on the rails and back in my box.

I hope the record makes fair reading.

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CHAPTER 1 – THE BIRTH OF A UNIT

CHAPTER 1

The Birth of a Unit

HOWEVER much the outcome of future wars may depend on atom power, or some yet-to-be-discovered source of energy, there is no doubt that petrol played a vital part in World Wars I and II. In the earlier conflict, **Britain** and her allies ‘floated to victory on a wave of oil’—American oil; and much of the peacetime strategy which followed aimed at the control of major oil supplies. For without oil the planes, the ships, the tanks, the transport, and other components of a military machine instantly become just so much junk.

It could be expected then, that after World War I, New Zealand authorities would hail the era of the internal combustion engine and dismiss horses from the military scene. But no. In 1919 our Army Service Corps could muster only 20 motor-trucks and cars; while by 1939 this country's total was 86 military motor vehicles of all kinds.

Germany, on the other hand, though forbidden by the Versailles Treaty to rearm, lost no time in building up for her *Blitzkrieg*, or lightning war, based on the use of motorised arms. She amassed vast stocks of planes, tanks, mobile guns and motor transport, and accumulated large stores of rubber, high-grade aviation fuel, motor spirit, and other petroleum products. Her High Command also created the organisation needed to keep large armies supplied with POL (petrol, oil and lubricants) during a large-scale and swift-moving military adventure.

In 1930 New Zealand abolished compulsory military training, and whittled down the NZASC from 457 all ranks to 287. By 1939 this arm had dwindled to 168, mostly Territorials, split up among the three military commands. Each of these had its own ASC company—a composite one undertaking all ASC duties and still using horse transport. Thus when World War II broke out, New Zealand had no unit specially formed or trained to supply a modern fighting force with POL,

or to service its vehicles—an unpromising start for that ‘Ball of Fire’ (as Churchill later dubbed the **2 NZEF**) so soon to become a spearhead in great mobile battles.

There was, in short, no New Zealand Petrol Company; and that lusty ‘babe’ which, through its ASC parentage, can trace a lineage back to the Maori Wars (when a Commissariat Transport Company used canoes and bullock drays) was still unborn.

When the call came in September 1939 for volunteers to form a Special Force, for service within or beyond New Zealand, Petrol Company components were already on hand. Gordon **Trevelyan**, ¹ for example, who claims to be the first man to register at the Wellington Area Office for service in World War II, was there and in uniform when war broke out. With him were other Territorials of 2 Composite Company, NZASC, on a weekend training course. WO II Trevelyan was then the company's sergeant-major.

Also present were three Territorial officers of the Composite Company who later held commissions in the original I New Zealand Petrol Company: Ken **Ramsden**, ² John **Hunter**, ³ and Alex **Dickson**, ⁴ Petrol Company's first OC. There, too, was the legendary Charles **Graham**, ⁵ whose bleak eye and bristling moustaches dominated the Company from the day of its inception. A regular soldier, Graham became Petrol Company's first CSM—also its terror, and its pride.

Early in the morning of 4 September, Staff-Sergeant Graham called the Territorial party together and announced that New Zealand was at war. The country needed volunteers, immediately, to run supplies to hastily mobilised Guards Vital Points. Who would offer? And so, more than a week before recruiting opened for the Special Force, about twenty citizen-soldiers of the ASC had begun their war effort. Of those who that way ‘beat the pistol’ some went, eventually, into the Petrol Company.

Others got in through a temporary vagueness over their date of birth. Age limits for the Special Force were from 21 to 35; and it is said

of the Petrol Company that most of its foundation members—the original ‘thirty-niners’—were either over or under age on enlistment. Some had seen service in the 1914-18 war; among the others Second-Lieutenant **McCook**, ⁶ who served throughout the 1939-45 war and afterwards in J Force, celebrated his 21st birthday a few months after arriving in Egypt. Many were among the 5419 New Zealanders who volunteered on the first day of enlistment, 12 September 1939.

One of these was Jim **Greig**. ⁷ Like Trevelyan he had done long service as a Territorial—14 years, in fact—learning the game of soldiering. And now, suddenly, here it was... the real thing. He was keen to go; but would they take him? Jim gave his age as 34, and to his relief (for somewhere the Army must have had his record) he was accepted.

It was a fine, sunny morning, Jim remembers—one of **Wellington's** best—and a crowd of chaps in civvies were milling round at Buckle Street, all eager, as he was, to enlist. A voice from a microphone called them to order.

‘Would the gentlemen please keep quiet and form a queue?’

Gentlemen? GENTLEMEN? What was this? They had no right to call him, and other old soldiers, ‘gentlemen’.

Then, later, with meaningful emphasis, the Voice intoned: ‘Would the *gentleman* who took a fountain-pen from the office table return it immediately— *please!!*’

They continued to be ‘gentlemen’ until they reached **Trentham**, where the fathers of some of them had trained years before. Thereafter they were called many things ... but never, never gentlemen! At first it was ‘Hey, soldier!’ or ‘You there!’, a useful anonymity which vanished when faces, figures and personalities became known to those in authority.

Some made an impression quite early—a bad thing in a regime of guards and fatigues, when ‘volunteers’ were selected by the time-

honoured method of pointing the finger, with a ritual chanting of 'You—and you—and you'. To be conspicuous then just didn't pay. Nor did it pay to 'lip' an NCO, or even to think your thoughts at him. These things and many more (few of them in the little red books) were soon learnt by Petrol Company types in those early days. They were, in fact, 'old soldiers' from the word go.

Nicknames came early and stayed late—until long after the war, in fact—and the Company's characters were soon sorted up, both then and as the 'show' developed.

'Why do they call me Atlas?' asked one worried corporal, with the cares of the world resting obviously on his shoulders. There was 'Mailbag' **Morgan**,⁸ always expecting letters (not the only one in those war days) and 'Two-ton Tony', 'Hurricane' **Harrison**,⁹ 'Stuka' **Livett**¹⁰ — not all foundation members of the Company, but all very popular, and conspicuous in its annals. Among them were 'Doc' **Donaldson**,¹¹ L. D. ('Light Duty') **Jones**,¹² 'Half-akker' **Neill**,¹³ and 'Boundary Bill' **Davis**,¹⁴ last seen well after the war riding the range on his Taranaki cow-ranch; while 'Cocko' **Howell**¹⁵ ... ah, yes ... 'Cocko' ... !

Like many another, 'Cocko' had been celebrating his introduction to soldiering, and he arrived at **Trentham** station feeling rather playful. On hand to meet the draft was Petrol Company's Ken Ramsden, with two bright stars shining on each shoulder. To 6000 Private Howell, F. W., they didn't mean a thing.

'Hey, Cocko', he called. 'Give us a hand with these b— bags will yer?'

And the good-natured lieutenant hoisted one battered suitcase while 'Cocko' struggled with another—the first and last time a Petrol Company other rank ever found an officer to act as his batman.

With 'Cocko' came Petrol Company recruits of every shape and size, in every variety of civilian garb, and at all stages of sobriety. Most were from **Wellington** city and district, and practically all had had experience in handling mechanical transport. Many had been car or truck drivers by

occupation; others were skilled mechanics, fitters, panel-beaters. These last were creamed off by Lieutenant **McDonagh**¹⁶ to form his D (Workshops) Section.

Adapting the frame to army clothing, and the feet to army boots, was only one of the many adjustments which recruits had to make at this stage. Their quarters—bell-tents, packed with other bodies and their dunnage—were cramped and uncomfortable. There was crowding at showers and ablutions, incessant queues, irritating orders and counter-orders, endless, and sometimes senseless, restrictions on personal liberty. Most men found this irksome at first; but before long they had all shaken down to the new way of life, and to a training programme aimed at ‘producing through hardship a tough physical fitness’.

Army rations, also, took some facing up to. But meals improved as the cooks got into their stride. On the whole, Charlie **Kavanagh**,¹⁷ Wally **Batt**¹⁸ and Frank **Briggs**¹⁹ did a good job for Petrol Company in its early days, and there were few complaints. The ‘babbling brooks’ had their difficulties, too. Sometimes, through lack of proper facilities, food prepared overnight was ‘on the nose’ by morning, and had to be thrown out—followed by much scurrying around to get something else ready in time for the men's breakfast. At that stage there was no refrigeration in the unit cookhouse, and foods such as meat, milk, and jellies had to be kept in the butcher's shop, which was cool and well ventilated.

Even there the stuff was not safe, Bill **Ambrose**²⁰ recalls, since it was liable to contamination by smuts from the cookhouse chimney. All Petrol Company's kitchen utensils were several sizes too large. This meant that potatoes and other vegetables had to be shifted off the coal-fuelled ranges as soon as they came to the boil; for if the top layers were allowed to cook through, those on the bottom would become mash!

At this time, Bill, who later became Petrol Company's sergeant cook, was struggling to qualify as a regimental ‘spud-barber’. They sent him, he says, to Army School, where he learnt the ration scale and nothing more, then back to camp to cook for an officers' mess. In their brand-

new cookhouse Bill was on velvet. He knew his pots and pans—he had done a bit of cooking on civvy street. But he had the devil's own job, he remembers, getting his 2s. 6d. a day extra-duty pay, and eventually had to go back to Army School to qualify. Another cookhouse character was the popular Charlie Hatchard,²¹ whose skill at marching out of step got him off the parade ground and into the kitchen as a permanent fatigue. He, like most of Petrol Company, became a front-line soldier on Crete and gave a good account of himself in the fighting at Galatas.

Washing-up facilities in Trentham were poor, and a constant source of complaint. They consisted usually of two dixies containing a thick slush that had once been water, one hot, one cold. The men, after meals, approached these in queues, dipping their mugs, mess-tins and 'eating-irons' first into one and then into the other. Tail-enders in the queue usually found it better to skip this ritual and rinse their gear by stealth at the ablution-stand taps.

Equally deplorable was the sanitation 'system'. At first this was on the bucket plan, each tin being fitted with a hinged lid liable to damage the user. Except for a while in the mornings these offices stank. The cans were emptied at night by convict gangs from the nearby gaol. Prisoners also removed the cookhouse swill, which had to be kept 'clean' and free from tins and tea leaves.

Gradually these primitive arrangements were replaced as public works contractors laboured day and night, installing hot showers, water-closets, and other amenities. They built huts and recreation halls, made roads, cleared rough land in the occupied areas, so that other drafts of the Special Force (later called the 2 NZEF) camped in comparative luxury.

But Petrol Company's first echelon had no such luck. Their lines were set on stony ground between those of Divisional Signals and 4 RMT, with 19 Battalion in the same area but on the farther flank of RMT. This layout gave rise to some lively inter-unit rivalries, with Petrol Company challenging strongly for the distinction of being the toughest

unit in camp. Nor did its men hesitate to proclaim themselves the senior ASC company.

In those early training days in the spring of 1939 CSM Graham ruled the roost, skilfully scarifying both officers and men. And the troops, though they trembled, loved it.

‘Have you a sense of humour, man?’ he would bellow, face pink and moustaches bristling. ‘For by the (something-something) you’ll need it before I’m finished with you!’

‘Private So-and-so!’ he once demanded. ‘What d’yer mean by coming on parade with a button undone?’ Then, as the luckless recruit looked down at the offending item: ‘That’s right—call me a liar! Won’t take my word for it, huh?’

On another occasion one soldier so far forgot himself as to call the Sar’nt-Major ‘Charlie’.

‘Good God, man!’ he thundered. ‘I’m pretty democratic, but I’m not *that* damned democratic. Call me *Sir!!*’

Came the day when Earle **Pickering**²² wanted leave to get married, with Fred **Davey**²³ lined up as best man. Anxiously Fred approached the Orderly Room (also ruled by CSM Graham) and lodged the request. This was granted. But when routine orders were posted they showed leave allowed for the best man, but not for the bridegroom!

Approached again by Fred, who mentioned the inconvenience of a wedding without a groom, the CSM guffawed: ‘Huh! Huh! Huh! If you had any guts you’d stand in for him!’

Himself a first-class soldier (and a man among men) Graham spared no effort to turn the recruits—raw and unpromising though some of them must have seemed—into soldiers also. And in a very few weeks he had succeeded. Their parade-ground work became as good as any in the **2 NZEF**, and was often watched by groups of admiring onlookers from

other units who happened to be off duty, excused duty, or just not caught up with.

But training in transport work did not follow so readily. To begin with, Petrol Company had scarcely a vehicle ... though Jim Greig remembers one awkward articulated six-wheeler—impressed from heaven knows where—which he was detailed to drive to the station for a load of baggage. Secretly, by night, Sergeant Greig spent hours learning to tame this unwieldy crate, at no small risk to huts and tentage.

Then one day the OC sent a party of drivers to Palmerston North to pick up transport. This, Petrol Company's first convoy, turned out to be a mixed bag of butchers' vans, brewery wagons, and the like, plus one Diamond-T truck, an Indiana 5-ton flat-top, and a couple of Morrises. Corporals **Brown**²⁴ and **Ginders**²⁵ helped to usher in this scratch outfit, crude forerunner of the efficient fleets the Company drove and maintained in battle areas.

Still, hopeless though the collection was by comparison, it was better than nothing, and it enabled some sort of MT training to be given. Before that, men could be seen tearing madly round at **Trentham**, checking the tyres, fuel and water of non-existent vehicles; obeying orders and signals to mount, dismount, advance in column to the right, deploy to the left, and so on, when there was exactly nothing to mount and dismount, or to drive and deploy. The signals were given with much vigour and arm-waving, the hands no doubt holding imaginary sabres.

The arrival of this transport also sparked the interest of Workshops (D Section) which was languishing for want of equipment, stores, spare parts, and a place to do business—also something to do business on. Their rough palms itched for the feel of spanner and grease-gun; and although there were few tools except privately-owned ones which some of the men had brought into camp with them, now at last they could be reasonably happy, probing the innards of engines, checking systems and assemblies, and generally comporting themselves in the manner proper to Workshops personnel.

Previously they had engaged in the 'general' or 'basic' training; and they still did their share of it. This was on infantry lines, and consisted of route marches (with and without respirators, rifles, packs, etc.), 'bull-ring', weapon training, rifle drill and PT. There was saluting to the right, the left, the front—with rifles, and without—but never, never!—without a hat. And so practised did they become at this martial exercise—saluting—that Petrol Company considered themselves not only the toughest, but the politest, unit in **Trentham**. But only on parade of course. In town, and around camp, they were all sadly afflicted with officer-blindness.

On 23 November came the announcement that the first contingent of the Special Force (or the First Echelon, as it was soon to be called) would shortly go overseas with Major-General Bernard **Freyberg** ²⁶ in command. This heartened the trainees, and put a stop to rumours that the Special Force was scheduled to go on leave without pay, and return to their jobs in 'civvy street'; or—even worse—that they would remain as a more or less permanent garrison in New Zealand base camps.

No destination was disclosed. The question depended on the attitude of **Japan**. But as her friendliness at that time seemed beyond doubt, the acting Prime Minister (the Hon. Peter Fraser), who was then in **London**, was able to advise Cabinet on 7 November that Egypt was the most suitable place for our troops. On 3 December the GOC, who was also in **London** after a period with the BEF in **France**, requested that an advance party of 50 other ranks be sent immediately to Egypt, to prepare for the arrival of the main body.

This advance party included Petrol Company's CQMS (Cecil **Broomfield** ²⁷), Sergeant **Macphail** ²⁸ and Driver **Cassin**. ²⁹ On 11 December it left **Wellington** for **Sydney** in TSS *Awatea*, and eventually reached **Suez** on 7 January. Meanwhile the rest of the Company carried on, with 'the mixture as before'—square-bashing, route marches, guards and fatigues, queues and reviews, inspections, injections, and objections. Woven into the pattern were such minor disasters as an epidemic of flu

which curtailed leave, a howling southerly that blew down all the tents, and an OC addicted to bagpipes.

Captain Dickson (known variously as 'Sandy', 'A.C.D.', or 'Granny') made a meticulous company commander and showed keen interest in the welfare of his men. He had served in the First World War, and then for many years as a Territorial officer. Lieutenants Hunter and Ramsden took over A and C Sections respectively; Second-Lieutenant McCook was Adjutant, Lieutenant McDonagh (another World War I veteran) Workshops Officer. Sergeants for A, C, and D Sections were W. F. Browne,³⁰ Les Cowen,³¹ and Jim Greig, with Harry Barnett³² as Mechanist Sergeant in D Section, and Alec Rusden³³ as orderly-room sergeant. B Section then existed only on paper; it was to be comprised of Second Echelon men.

Came a sobering moment when members of the Wellington Law Society arrived in camp to help soldiers make their wills, free of charge. About the same time Petrol Company got their 'meat tickets'—identification discs stamped with name, regimental number, religion and blood-group.

Some of the 'hard shots' began to play up, on the principle of 'roosters today, feather dusters tomorrow'; and Fred Davey got three days' pack-drill for back-chatting the CSM. On the first day, conveniently 'forgetting' this sentence, Fred hailed himself, after training, to the wet canteen. But CSM Graham had not forgotten; in such matters his memory was infallible. Fred was hauled off under escort, to shoulder a large pack filled with sand, and thus saddled to pound the bull-ring. Next night Fred didn't wait for an escort. He got to the bull-ring early. There he emptied the troublesome pack and refilled it with paper, sprinkling a little sand on top.

Other martial exploits involving the Company about this time were the silencing of one camp bugler's instrument by stuffing it with paper and the choking of the OC's chanter with cheese. This was done with due regard for medical ethics by the RMO, Lieutenant Lomas.³⁴ Of more

sanguinary character were the occasional skirmishes with the neighbouring infantry; while proceedings were also enlivened by a spot of mutiny when a band of revellers set out to 'crown' Sergeant Greig with a latrine can.

Less easily dealt with were the night operations of a pocket of banshees. These employed nuisance tactics after lights out by emitting blood-curdling howls and wolf-calls. Chief casualties were the peace of mind of certain officers, and of the orderly sergeant detailed to deal with the situation. The methods of the infiltrators were simple enough: from somewhere down the line of darkened tents a solitary yowl would arise—to be answered by another and then another, until the whole area was at it.

Urged on by his superiors, the maddened NCO would pounce, swiftly raise a tent-flap, and shine his torch on the faces of the men—only to find them all snoring peacefully! In time the powers-that-were learned sense; they forbore to take the matter seriously, and so the operation gradually fizzled out.

Meanwhile brows were puckering and lights were burning late in **Trentham** orderly rooms as the final touches were put to plans for embarkation. On 14 December—while HMS *Achilles* was pursuing the German battleship *Admiral Graf Spee* somewhere off the mouth of the **River Plate**—the First Echelon was placed on active service. The men were given a fortnight's final leave, free travel warrants to their home or place of enlistment, and were paid a £3 gratuity. The war was now a distinct step nearer.

In their home towns the men were feted, given parties, receptions, farewells. Many received gifts; while it was clear from the speeches that most people now realised that this war, despite some phoney aspects, did have its more serious side. Not in the same street, of course, with World War I; but serious enough to involve New Zealand lives, to affect New Zealand homes and ways of life. The recruits themselves were far from dismayed. They enjoyed the fun-and-games, went on the 'scoot', and

were happy to spend Christmas at home—the last for years for most of them; for others, the last ever.

By New Year, 1940, Petrol Company and the rest were back on the old beat at **Trentham**, but with a difference. Tents and tucker were much the same; new buildings had gone up; there were freshly-tarred roads between the lines. But the big change was in the men themselves. They were maturer now, more self-assured. They had assumed the mantle of the Anzacs; and they walked with brisk step and chin held high, as though they realised that on them, and their like, hung the fate of civilisation.

But that did not damp their ebullience. As ‘Y’ Day approached—the date for embarkation—Petrol Company personnel showed increased signs of mounting spirits and a disposition to ‘kick over the traces’ ... to have a last fling (or a whole series of them) before plunging into the hazards of war. And despite the vigilance of NCOs and pickets, many took unofficial leave in the city, some staying overnight, but invariably showing up in time for the morning muster.

Though every man was by now hard and fit, their ASC training had been hampered by lack of MT and other equipment. This was noted by the GOC, who had arrived from England on Christmas Day. The troops, he reported, would need a further period of training at their place of disembarkation, and would not be fit for war for another three months. There they would get their vehicles and other equipment, as arranged with the British War Office.

Both the destination and the date of sailing remained undisclosed, although detailed embarkation orders had been arriving at unit headquarters since 20 December. On 3 January 1940 an order marked ‘Secret’ informed the ASC that ‘Y’ Day for them was 5 January, and that when they entrained at **Trentham** station NCOs were to be ‘posted one at each door of each carriage to prevent unauthorised ingress or egress of personnel’. The order went on to say:

‘O.C. trains will ensure that all personnel know that owing to small clearance between railway carriages and cranes, all windows must be kept closed to ensure that no hands are put out, nor should NCOs on duty in each carriage leave the doors of carriages to look over iron gates’. Things were beginning to move at last. But either this message was mis-typed, or the authorities were more concerned about hands than heads!

Many were disappointed, no doubt, to read (in Embarkation Order No. 2) that ‘swords and scabbards will *not* be carried by officers, and will *not* be taken overseas’. Of more interest to Petrol Company was the instruction that ASC personnel would *not* take with them ‘frogs, web, bayonet’, though this provision did not absolve them from further dull periods of infantry training on board ship and at their destination.

On 3 January all leave for the First Echelon ceased. In the morning Petrol Company, along with the rest, took part in a ceremonial parade through **Wellington. Their marching was judged fully equal to that of the infantry, though some hold that its excellence on this occasion was due to the strategic placement of a pipe band (through the influence of Captain Dickson) just in front. There was also a complaint that the officers, not carrying rifles, forgot to give orders to change arms; so some men arrived back at **Trentham** sore both in temper and shoulder. In the afternoon the camp was open to visitors.**

Two days later Petrol Company, loaded with baggage, scrambled aboard troop-train C2 at **Trentham station. By 9.20 a.m. they were waving farewell, with more of irony than real regret, to the camp that had been their home for three months. And so they set out on the long eventful Odyssey which was to lead them into many lands, and across many seas, in defence of their homeland. At 10.4 a.m. they arrived in **Wellington**. By noon they had embarked.**

Their ship was the *Orion*, still equipped with the trimmings of a passenger liner. As HM (NZ) Transport Z4 she carried on that trip 1428 troops, and did it in style. Privates and corporals found unexpected

comfort in their four-berth cabins—reading lamps, wash-hand basins, wardrobes. Officers and sergeants fared even better, with access to smoking-rooms and lounges. For all ranks there were swimming baths, deck games, wet and dry canteens. Little wonder that the troops showed a disposition to wallow; and Petrol Company NCOs had trouble at first getting some of their men to ‘show a leg’.

At 2 p.m. Z4 moved out into the stream, to the sound of cheering, shouting, and the hooting of sirens from on shore. For despite all efforts at secrecy, a large crowd had gathered at the wharves to watch the troops embark, while the hills overlooking the harbour were thronged with people. Other ships in the convoy were the *Empress of Canada* (carrying 809 all ranks), the *Strathaird* (1350), and the *Rangitata* (442), with their naval escort HMS *Ramillies* and HMAS *Canberra*.

Next day, 6 January, at 6 a.m. the fleet steamed out into Cook Strait, there to make rendezvous with the *Sobieski* (1145 all ranks) and the *Dunera* (1355) bringing troops from the **South Island**, under escort of HMS *Leander*. The ships formed up in convoy order, then steamed west toward the Tasman. Overhead, aircraft of the **Royal New Zealand Air Force** dipped their wings in salute, as another New Zealand Expeditionary Force—the second within a generation—set out from its homeland.

¹ **WO II G. A. Trevelyan**, EM and bar; **Lower Hutt**; born Taradale, 13 Jun 1909; labourer.

² **Capt K. Ramsden**; **Tauranga**; born England, 9 Jul 1910; builder.

³ **Maj J. J. Hunter**, m.i.d.; Kiripaka, **Whangarei**; born England, 1 Jan 1914; clerk.

⁴ **Maj A. C. Dickson**; **Tauranga**; born NZ 13 Oct 1890; company manager; Divisional Train, Anzac Mtd Div (Dvr), in 1914-18 war;

OC Div Pet Coy Sep 1939-Apr 1941.

⁵ Maj C. E. Graham; Wellington; born Dunedin, 10 Feb 1907; Regular soldier.

⁶ Lt-Col A. F. McCook, MBE; born NZ 14 Jun 1919; civil servant; accidentally killed, Japan, 1 Jan 1947.

⁷ Sgt J. S. Greig; Wellington; born NZ 13 Apr 1903; sales manager; wounded 25 May 1941; p.w. 1 Jun 1941; repatriated Nov 1943.

⁸ Dvr H. W. Morgan; born NZ 8 Dec 1918; railway porter; died of wounds 19 Apr 1941.

⁹ Dvr I. A. Harrison; born NZ 9 May 1914; gardener; killed in action May 1941.

¹⁰ Dvr J. Livett; Lower Hutt; born England, 10 Oct 1905; railway workshops employee.

¹¹ Sgt J. W. Donaldson; New Plymouth; born NZ 27 Sep 1908; lorry driver.

¹² Dvr L. D. Jones; born Masterton, 20 Jul 1917; department manager.

¹³ Dvr N. M. Neill; born NZ 4 Jun 1918; lorry driver.

¹⁴ Capt W. M. Davis, MBE, ED, m.i.d.; Waverley; born Waverley, 21 Jan 1907; farmer.

¹⁵ Dvr F. W. Howell; Wellington; born Wellington, 6 Feb 1910; truck driver; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

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

17 Dvr C. F. Kavanagh; born Glasgow, 7 Jun 1914; labourer.

18 Dvr W. C. Batt; Wakefield; born NZ 5 Dec 1917; storeman; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

19 Dvr F. D. Briggs; Lower Hutt; born NZ 14 Jan 1914; motor driver; wounded May 1941.

20 Sgt S. W. Ambrose; Feilding; born Wellington, 20 Oct 1904; joiner.

21 Dvr C. W. H. Hatchard; Carterton; born NZ 4 Apr 1907; farm labourer; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

22 Dvr E. V. Pickering; born NZ 20 Feb 1918; carpenter; killed in action 21 May 1941.

23 Sgt F. Davey; Palmerston North; born NZ 18 Apr 1917; salesman; twice wounded.

24 Cpl R. J. Brown; born NZ 21 Jun 1904; storeman; wounded May 1941; died 31 Dec 1953.

25 Sgt B. C. Ginders; Nelson; born Wellington, 1 May 1906; motor driver; p.w. 1 Jun 1941; escaped, Germany, Apr 1945.

26 Lt-Gen Lord Freyberg, VC, GCMG, KCB, KBE, DSO and 3 bars, m.i.d., Order of Valour and MC (Gk); born Richmond, Surrey, 21 Mar 1889; CO Hood Bn 1914-16; comd 173 Bde, 58 Div, and 88 Bde, 29 Div, 1917-18; GOC 2 NZEF Nov 1939-Nov 1945; twice wounded; Governor-General of New Zealand Jun 1946-Aug 1952.

27 S-Sgt C. H. Broomfield; born NZ 21 Jun 1907; presser; wounded Dec 1940; wounded and p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

28 Maj I. C. Macphail; Otane, Hawke's Bay; born Glasgow, 22 Jun 1907; sheep farmer; wounded 20 May 1941; p.w. 25 May 1941; repatriated Oct 1943; DAA & QMG, 2 NZEF(UK), 1945-46.

29 Dvr P. J. Cassin; Wellington; born Wellington, 27 Aug 1912; motor driver; wounded May 1941.

30 Sgt W. F. Browne; Lower Hutt; born Wellington, 15 Aug 1906; stores manager; wounded 23 May 1941.

31 WO II L. C. H. Cowen; born Sydney, 1 Jun 1914; draughtsman.

32 Maj H. W. Barnett, OBE, m.i.d.; Wellington; born NZ 26 Feb 1906; motor mechanic; OC Div Pet Coy Feb-Oct 1945; comd ASC J Force 1946.

33 Lt A. S. Rusden; Upper Takaka; born Wanganui, 2 Feb 1913; clerk; p.w. 29 Nov 1941; repatriated Jul 1943.

34 Maj A. L. Lomas, MC, m.i.d.; New Plymouth; born Wanganui, 30 Jun 1916; medical practitioner; DADMS 2 NZ Div Aug 1943-Apr 1944.

PETROL COMPANY

CHAPTER 2 – AT SEA

CHAPTER 2

At Sea

IN their snug quarters on 'C' deck Petrol Company's 165 other ranks soon shook down to shipboard life. From Cabin 15, Sergeant Greig wrote in his diary:

2nd Day Out, Sunday, 7/1/40

Lifebelt and trousers handy to bed, ready for all hands in case of emergency.

Oil and flannelette issue for rifles.

Lectures by Lt McDonagh, Sgt Barnett, Pte Ross ¹ and Pte Williams, L. J. ²

Beautiful and calm today. 14 hours out from Wgtn. Troops settling down. Slight swell last night caused a spot of seasickness.... Church parade 1100 hrs a great success. Deck quoits and tennis good sport.

3rd Day Out, Monday, 8/1/40

Orderly Sergeant today. Very quiet. The heat down below on 'F' deck where O/Room is situated became rather oppressive and I was inclined to feel the motion of the ship somewhat. However, was not sick—pictures on tonight—looked in for few minutes but atmosphere was stifling so did not stay. Harry Barnett and myself had to go out on deck to inspect covering over Vauxhall chassis. Owing to black-out it was very hard to find one's way about. We could just discern the silhouette of the accompanying vessels.

Saw school of porpoises at dusk—they follow one another and are great to watch.

4th Day Out, Tuesday, 9/1/40

Still another fine day. Woke up feeling much refreshed after good

sleep.

Despite white-caps our ship rides well—must be getting used to the motion now as today I have not felt it in the least.

Meals are great—our waiter, George, is a wizard at his job. This morning, Empress of **Canada** left her position behind our ship and tore past over the horizon with **Ramillies** and **Canberra** as escort.

Reported she has gone to **Sydney** for oil. Also that she has **Gen. Freyberg** aboard. *

Vaccination today.

5th Day Out, Wednesday, 10/1/40

Saw a whale this afternoon, and some of the boys report seeing sharks.

A great day again. Weather marvellous, and sea very calm this morning. We notice the heat of the sun increasing as we near **Australia**.

Owing to vaccinations we are not allowed to wet the vaccinated part of our left arm—it is amusing to watch the chaps walking about in the swimming-pool holding one arm out of the water all the time.

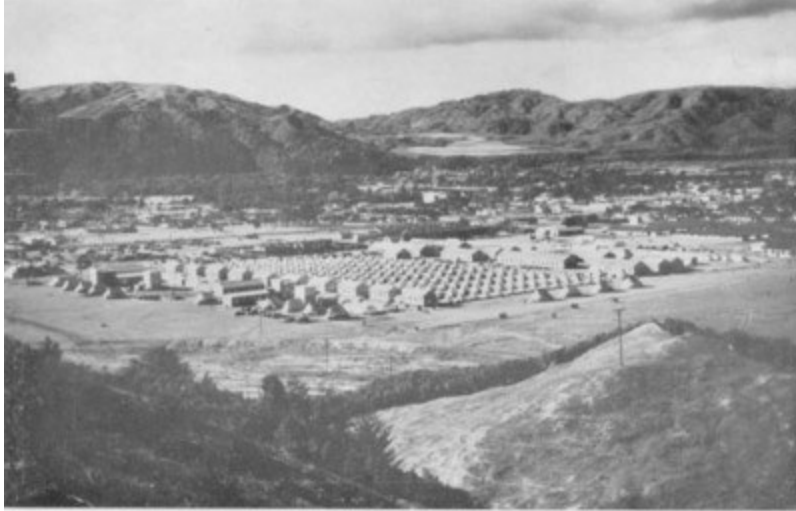
Empress of **Canada** rejoined us this morning. Coast of **Australia** is visible on the horizon and we are supposed to be near **Sydney**. Aeroplanes have flown over the convoy today. The first batch of Aussie ships joined us at 2 p.m.—four large troopships, reported to be **Orcades**, **Strathmore** [**Strathnaver**], **Orford** and another, together with escorting cruisers. We are now proceeding towards **Melbourne** to pick up some more. Steve just came in with Special Force Badges —the first out.

6th Day Out, Thursday, 11/1/40

Fine weather continues. We are not far from the Australian Coast and are all wondering where we are going. General opinion favours

Fremantle as definite port of call, but as usual nobody knows.

All allotted boat stations today, and from now on parade twice daily at boat stations. Good idea, and after a few days of it all of us should find our way to boat stations in the dark.



Trentham Camp, 1939

Trentham Camp, 1939

Spick and span—Petrol Company lines ready for inspection



Spick and span—Petrol Company lines ready for inspection



March past,

March past

D (Workshops) Section, Trentham, December 1939



D (Workshops) Section, Trentham, December 1939



Trentham Camp, October 1939

Trentham Camp, October 1939

Petrol Company about to embark on the *Orion* at Wellington



Petrol Company about to embark on the *Orion* at Wellington



Workshops Section with the Vauxhall chassis which was used for lectures en route to the Middle East

Workshops Section with the Vauxhall chassis which was used for lectures en route to the Middle East



The first mail arrives at **Maadi Camp**

Kit inspection today. Several aeroplanes observed again. Am thoroughly used to motion of ship now and would like to see a bit of rough weather (but not too rough!). Convoy now comprises 10 troopships and escorts. A great gathering of mercantile tonnage— what a chance for the enemy! ‘D’ Section had best kit inspection today. Deck tennis with Charley, Ben **Cooper³ and Les Cowen. All good sports.**

* * * * *

And so the time slipped by, pleasantly enough, on a crisp sunny crossing of the Tasman. The *Orion* rode easily on a rising swell, and only the most squeamish were affected. At six o'clock each morning, 18 Battalion's bugler played a persistent reveille, Petrol Company responded reluctantly, and the day's business began. First came PT, taken with the infantry, and usually including much joyful horseplay with the battalion's medicine ball. Showers followed, then breakfast. All mess parades were compulsory, whether one ate or not.

Training programmes took up most of the morning and afternoon, while during each forenoon the ship was inspected by its Commander, the OC Troops, and others. Lunch was served in the ship's dining room at noon, dinner at 5 p.m.; lights out was at 10.30 p.m. For training there were lectures by unit officers and NCOs, rifles to be cleaned and inspected, sand-tray demonstrations of tactics. Even route marches were

achieved, by dint of much dodging around deck gear and fittings. The cut-down Vauxhall chassis mentioned in Sergeant Greig's diary was used for instruction in the principles of the internal combustion engine.

And if any man imagined that embarkation meant the end of pickets and fatigues he was soon disillusioned. Each day the unit for duty supplied a ship's guard consisting of three officers, a sergeant, a corporal, and six other ranks, to protect the ship's armoury and keep troops away from out-of-bounds areas. Besides this there were lifeboat guards, ship's police, pickets; fatigues for the bakehouse, the butchery, the galleys. Petrol Company supplied its own mess orderlies, took turns at scrubbing decks, cleaning latrines, mopping out shower rooms. With all this went the endless 'Do's' and 'Don'ts' of routine orders, all manner of checks and inspections, and every so often another jab from the MO's needle. So one way and another the voyage was no Cook's Tour, despite the rosy versions that appeared in some home papers.

In two-hour watches throughout the day submarine lookouts scanned the water within a mile of the ship, seeking torpedoes or periscopes. Also manned during hours of daylight were machine-gun posts for protection against attack by low-flying aircraft. Gunners were forbidden to fire, however, without specific orders from a ship's officer on the bridge.

In their off-duty hours the troops did not lack amusement. Like soldiers everywhere they gambled at cards and dice, despite official vetoes and occasional swoops by the Military Police. Needless to say, these measures were generally foiled by the watchfulness of the soldiery; so poker, pontoon, crown-and-anchor and the like continued to flourish, along with housie-housie. This had official sanction and was heavily patronised, some schools numbering well over a hundred.

Deck-games and sports contests also had their vogue, while there were swimming carnivals, 'race meetings' (complete with totalisator), concerts, films, community singing. For the quieter types there were books to read, letters to write; long yarns with cronies on a lee deck, or

over a pot of ale; hours spent watching the swirl of wake and waters, endlessly fascinating at night, when a phosphorescent fire lit the surface; while close by crept those faint ghosts, the other vessels, with no light showing in the whole vast silent convoy.

Friday, 12 January, brought a ripple of excitement. Early risers saw land, and a lighthouse, only a few chains off. For many, this view of Wilson's Promontory, south-east of Melbourne, was their first sight of another country, and they gazed enthralled. Others took one look at the now-heaving waters and returned in haste to their bunks. **Australia** could wait... or sink, if it liked! During the night a wind had risen. The day broke cold and boisterous, and continued that way. On the starboard bow HMS *Ramillies* slashed her way through mounting waves in a slather of foam, a magnificent sight. At midday the *Empress of Japan* nosed out from Port Phillip Bay and joined the convoy.

Next day the wind abated. The ships cleared **Bass Strait** and entered the Australian Bight. Though still cool the weather was pleasant, especially in the sun on a lee side; and sun-bathers crowded the upper decks. But the fine spell was short-lived. Sunday the 14th was the roughest day out, with high seas and a howling wind. All parades except boat-drill were cancelled. Attendances at mess reached an all-time low. That day Petrol Company received their white ASC shoulder flashes. Badges also were issued—of good design, but poor material, one driver records. Sergeant Greig continues:

10th Day Out, Monday, 15/1/40

Sea moderating somewhat. Feel better again, thank Heaven! Quite a few chaps were down to it yesterday and last night. Thank goodness we have decent quarters; it would not be so good in an old-fashioned troopship! ! !

Petrol Company for duty today. Relieved Harry [Barnett] as Guard Sgt for a few hours to allow him to lecture. Very quiet day on the whole.

Quite a few porpoises about.

Boat drill parade 8.40 p.m. Was not quite dark but anticipate we will be having an emergency call one night before long. The clocks go back another hour tonight—this puts us four hours behind New Zealand time now.

11th Day Out, Tuesday, 16/1/40

Rather a rough sort of night. We were broadside on to the weather for some hours last night, and one damned near rolled out of bed. The ship groaned and creaked, doors were slamming all night and I could not sleep after 4 a.m. However, I was not sick, and feel O.K. this morning. At the same time I have just realised that I have cut out smoking!

We had a mock aeroplane attack this morning and all had to keep below decks.

Many of us are feeling sick—not from seasickness but possibly after-effects of vaccination.

All ranks are looking forward to getting into **Fremantle—even though we probably won't get leave it will be good to see shore life once again from the distance.**

Excitement mounted as Z4 approached **Fremantle. Men crammed the rails, and those with binoculars scanned the horizon. Late in the morning of 18 January land was sighted. By 5 p.m. the *Orion* had berthed; and the news soon spread round: 'Shore leave for all, until midnight'. Then—trust the Army—there was a hold-up, over pay. Petrol Company, like the rest, were broke. Must they go ashore like that? It seemed so. Then, at last, the happy word came: 'Pay in the Orderly Room at 2000 hours.' Each other rank drew one pound Australian and was debited 16s. in his paybook, his 'earnings' having been put on a sterling basis from the time he left New Zealand.**

Fortunately for the troops, hotels and business places stayed open

late; so in both **Perth** and **Fremantle** the men saw 'beer and soldiers everywhere'. Military brass-hats took a tolerant view of any exuberant horseplay, while the citizens were amused and happy to watch the antics of this first contingent—the forerunner of many—to arrive from 'the other side'. Magnificently they played **Australia's** traditional role of Big Brother to the New Zealanders, helping rather than hindering the high jinks, and contriving to keep the visitors out of trouble, if not out of mischief. While most soldiers were pretty well behaved, many were 'jobs' by the time leave ceased at midnight; and with the Company rostered as unit for duty, some went on guard straight away... a poor preparation for next day's 'star turn'.

This was the now-famous march from **Fremantle** to **Perth** by all troops from Z4. Before they left the ship the men were given the option of marching to **Perth** or staying on board. It was a chance to get extra leave ashore and most chose to march, even though they would be marching in army boots for the first time after a fortnight in deck shoes—to say nothing of their capers the night before.

Zero hour was 10 a.m., on a crisp, sunny morning. Headed by a band, the troops set off in fine fettle. It was good to be on land again—to be soldiers again, and not ruddy seamen. Good to be hailed and cheered by cooee-ing Aussies, who lined the roadway along the whole 14-mile route, handing out fruit, soft drinks, chewing gum, beer, offering lifts in their cars and taxis. Good to see arid smell the bluegums, to see the girls in their summer dresses. Everything was absolutely good—at first!

Then, as mile gave way to weary mile, joy faded out. The sun climbed, and so did the temperature, to up around 95 degrees. Sweat ran from every pore; but the men trudged on, eyes fixed doggedly on the back of the man ahead. Or on his heels. 'Boots, boots, boots, boots, moving up and down again.' Even Trentham had never been like this; and Kipling's lines came back to many with a new significance. For some the ordeal was heightened by sore arms and throbbing heads after the recent vaccination. But *all* of Petrol Company stuck it out and marched, with head erect and arms swinging, into the centre of **Perth**

city just three hours forty minutes after leaving the ship's side.

Then, for half an hour or so, the good burghers of **Perth** witnessed a scene never before or since enacted there: both sides of Swan Street—the city's main thoroughfare—were lined with barefooted soldiers, sitting on the sidewalk clutching handles of beer, while they bathed their naked feet in the cool running water of the gutters.

Recovery was quick and complete. In no time the Kiwis had again 'taken' the city and made it their playground. The citizens looked on, tolerant or amused, while New Zealanders drove trams, directed traffic, swiped policemen's helmets, or manoeuvred motor-cars into impossible positions. As one Petrol Company driver remarked: 'No one offered us the freedom of the city. We just took it.'

Perth opened its heart and its homes to all. Hotels 'turned it on', with counter-lunch and hot baths on the side. Every family, almost, took in soldiers for rest and refreshment, afterwards treating them to drives and excursions, picnics and parties. Some men went exploring on their own; and Petrol Company's Pat **Rumney**⁴ eventually found himself with a couple of cobbers amid pleasant parklands on the outskirts. They rested on smooth lawns, cooled themselves under water-sprinklers, slept in the shade of leafy trees. Then they rubbed their eyes. A servant-girl was bringing them afternoon tea, on a tray. They had wandered into the grounds of the Governor of **Western Australia**.

The convoy cleared **Fremantle** next afternoon. On board the *Orion*, Petrol Company's Peter **Winter**⁵ and Joe **Stratford**,⁶ with Private **Hirsch**⁷ of 18 Battalion, got down to the business of producing a ship's magazine. First issue of their 'N.Z. Abroad', illustrated with some clever black-and-white sketches by Frank **Ritchie**⁸ (also of Petrol Company) came out on 26 January. The forerunner of many service periodicals, this was a notable production. It led off with a message and introduction by Lieutenant-Colonel Crump, OBE,⁹ Commander of the NZASC, and OC Troops on Transport Z4:

I sincerely appreciate the privilege of being allowed the opportunity of contributing the introduction to this magazine particularly because we have created a record, in that this vessel carries the greatest number of soldiers that has ever left New Zealand in one ship. This superlative also applies to the ship, its officers, and crew.

This magazine will be held and valued by us as a token of a very enjoyable trip, during which was born that cameraderie such as develops in no other sphere of life.

We set out on this great adventure not knowing what is before us, but we do know that our greatest job is to get fit and keep fit so that we can fulfil the task before us.

Enough said! Let's pull up the curtain.

Then followed congratulations to that same officer on the anniversary of his birthday (25 January), with the observation that the poet Burns was born on the same day. Following which comes the sly quotation:

**O wa'd some po'er the giftie gie us
Tae see oorsel's as ithers see us**

The magazine also contained side-kicks in verse and prose at prominent personalities; aspersions on shipboard and army life; and the following satire, redolent of an era now past, on German propaganda reports:

***UNOFFICIAL WAR NEWS
(Per Latrinogram)***

One of the heaviest air attacks in the present war was launched on a German port by the Allies yesterday. According to a German radio station, no fewer than 50 British planes took part in the attack. On the approach of the enemy, two German fighter planes intercepted the British squadrons and successfully drove off the invaders, twelve of

which were shot down and 19 were seen to disappear over the horizon in flames. The German machines both returned to their base undamaged. The Iron Cross was not awarded to the German airmen as such victories have now become an everyday occurrence.

Also in the magazine were references to 'cheese, which certain persons inserted in the vitals of Capt. Dickson's bagpipes on New Year's Eve'; a 'public denial' by 'one Charles Graham of the Div Pet Coy' that he was in the habit of using Hood's Healthful Hair Restorer 'or any other stimulant' to encourage the growth on his upper lip; and a verdict on the ship's grog that 'it looks like beer, it smells like beer, but it tastes like—'. Regarding the march to **Perth** it comments: 'We made a triumphal entry, the band at our head. Our feet were blistered, our limbs were stiff, our thoughts were quite unspeakable....' Again concerning **Perth**: 'Army's procedure of lining up for everything from pay to patches becomes a habit. A number of soldiers were observed in a certain popular street recently trying to arrange themselves in alphabetical order'.

From the second number of 'N.Z. Abroad' come the following bright splinters: 'The submarine lookout peered intently through his binoculars, never shifting his eyes from the ocean. Something had crossed his line of vision. Yes, there it was again ... now he was certain ... excitedly he turned to his fellow lookout, and shouted: "These bloody flying-fish DO flap their wings!"'

And, again with Charlie Graham 'in the gun':

THE C.S.M

There were upturned whiskers on the face,
Of a strangely ginger hue,
And a horrid look of grim distaste,
That made me feel quite blue.
Before my face it reared its head,
A head that turned quite pink,
And a voice from through the whiskers said,

¹ ¹S/Sgt W. B. Ross, m.i.d.; Wellington; born Dunedin, 24 Sep 1909; auto-electrician; wounded 27 May 1941.

² ² WO II L. J. Williams; Hastings; born Wellington, 19 Jun 1912; motor engineer; wounded 20 May 1941.

³ ³ Capt A. B. Cooper; Wellington; born NZ 14 Jan 1914; Regular soldier.

⁴ ⁴ Dvr H. P. Rumney; Palmerston North; born Wanganui, 1 Oct 1918; clerk; wounded 20 May 1941; p.w. 28 May 1941; repatriated Jan 1945.

⁵ ⁵ Sgt P. L. Winter; born NZ 28 Jan 1918; journalist; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

⁶ ⁶ Dvr J. J. Stratford; Lower Hutt; born Wellington, 30 Jan 1916; agent; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

⁷ ⁷ Capt J. C. Hirsch; South Africa; born South Africa, 7 Nov 1914; journalist; wounded and p.w. 22 Sep 1942.

⁸ ⁸ Cpl C. D. F. Ritchie; born NZ 2 Oct 1916; labourer.

⁹ ⁹ Brig S. H. Crump, CBE, DSO, m.i.d., Bronze Star (US); Lower Hutt; born Wellington, 25 Jan 1889; Regular soldier; NZASC 1915-19; Commander NZASC, 2NZ Div, 1940-45; comd 2 NZEF, Japan, Jun-Sep 1947; on staff HQ BCOF and NZ repve on Disposals Board in Japan, 1948-49.

*** Subsequent information proved this statement correct for once! Gen. F. flew to Egypt from Sydney. Empress anchored near Sydney Bridge for 3 hours only and then left to rejoin convoy.**

PETROL COMPANY

[SECTION]

IN their snug quarters on 'C' deck Petrol Company's 165 other ranks soon shook down to shipboard life. From Cabin 15, Sergeant Greig wrote in his diary:

2nd Day Out, Sunday, 7/1/40

Lifebelt and trousers handy to bed, ready for all hands in case of emergency.

Oil and flannelette issue for rifles.

Lectures by Lt McDonagh, Sgt Barnett, Pte Ross ¹ and Pte Williams, L. J. ²

Beautiful and calm today. 14 hours out from Wgtn. Troops settling down. Slight swell last night caused a spot of seasickness.... Church parade 1100 hrs a great success. Deck quoits and tennis good sport.

3rd Day Out, Monday, 8/1/40

Orderly Sergeant today. Very quiet. The heat down below on 'F' deck where O/Room is situated became rather oppressive and I was inclined to feel the motion of the ship somewhat. However, was not sick—pictures on tonight—looked in for few minutes but atmosphere was stifling so did not stay. Harry Barnett and myself had to go out on deck to inspect covering over Vauxhall chassis. Owing to black-out it was very hard to find one's way about. We could just discern the silhouette of the accompanying vessels.

Saw school of porpoises at dusk—they follow one another and are great to watch.

4th Day Out, Tuesday, 9/1/40

Still another fine day. Woke up feeling much refreshed after good sleep.

Despite white-caps our ship rides well—must be getting used to the motion now as today I have not felt it in the least.

Meals are great—our waiter, George, is a wizard at his job. This morning, Empress of **Canada left her position behind our ship and tore past over the horizon with **Ramillies** and **Canberra** as escort.**

Reported she has gone to **Sydney for oil. Also that she has **Gen. Freyberg** aboard. ***

Vaccination today.

5th Day Out, Wednesday, 10/1/40

Saw a whale this afternoon, and some of the boys report seeing sharks.

A great day again. Weather marvellous, and sea very calm this morning. We notice the heat of the sun increasing as we near **Australia.**

Owing to vaccinations we are not allowed to wet the vaccinated part of our left arm—it is amusing to watch the chaps walking about in the swimming-pool holding one arm out of the water all the time.

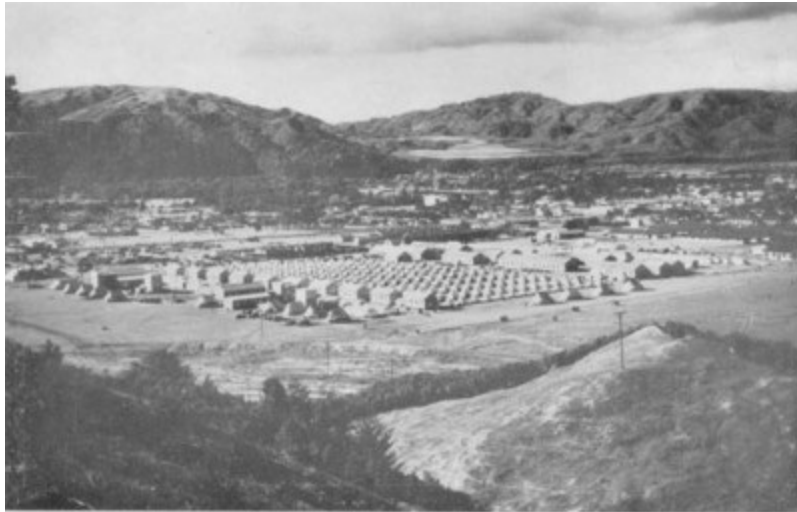
Empress of **Canada rejoined us this morning. Coast of **Australia** is visible on the horizon and we are supposed to be near **Sydney**. Aeroplanes have flown over the convoy today. The first batch of Aussie ships joined us at 2 p.m.—four large troopships, reported to be **Orcades**, **Strathmore** [**Strathnaver**], **Orford** and another, together with escorting cruisers. We are now proceeding towards **Melbourne** to pick up some more. Steve just came in with Special Force Badges —the first out.**

6th Day Out, Thursday, 11/1/40

Fine weather continues. We are not far from the Australian Coast

and are all wondering where we are going. General opinion favours **Fremantle** as definite port of call, but as usual nobody knows.

All allotted boat stations today, and from now on parade twice daily at boat stations. Good idea, and after a few days of it all of us should find our way to boat stations in the dark.



Trentham Camp, 1939

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Spick and span—Petrol Company lines ready for inspection



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March past,

March past

D (Workshops) Section, Trentham, December 1939



D (Workshops) Section, Trentham, December 1939



Trentham Camp, October 1939

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Petrol Company about to embark on the *Orion* at Wellington



Petrol Company about to embark on the *Orion* at Wellington



Workshops Section with the Vauxhall chassis which was used for lectures en route to the Middle East

Workshops Section with the Vauxhall chassis which was used for lectures en route to the Middle East



The first mail arrives at **Maadi Camp**

Kit inspection today. Several aeroplanes observed again. Am thoroughly used to motion of ship now and would like to see a bit of rough weather (but not too rough!). Convoy now comprises 10 troopships and escorts. A great gathering of mercantile tonnage— what a chance for the enemy! 'D' Section had best kit inspection today. Deck tennis with Charley, Ben **Cooper³ and Les Cowen. All good sports.**

* * * * *

And so the time slipped by, pleasantly enough, on a crisp sunny crossing of the Tasman. The *Orion* rode easily on a rising swell, and only the most squeamish were affected. At six o'clock each morning, 18 Battalion's bugler played a persistent reveille, Petrol Company responded reluctantly, and the day's business began. First came PT, taken with the infantry, and usually including much joyful horseplay with the battalion's medicine ball. Showers followed, then breakfast. All mess parades were compulsory, whether one ate or not.

Training programmes took up most of the morning and afternoon, while during each forenoon the ship was inspected by its Commander, the OC Troops, and others. Lunch was served in the ship's dining room at noon, dinner at 5 p.m.; lights out was at 10.30 p.m. For training there were lectures by unit officers and NCOs, rifles to be cleaned and inspected, sand-tray demonstrations of tactics. Even route marches were

achieved, by dint of much dodging around deck gear and fittings. The cut-down Vauxhall chassis mentioned in Sergeant Greig's diary was used for instruction in the principles of the internal combustion engine.

And if any man imagined that embarkation meant the end of pickets and fatigues he was soon disillusioned. Each day the unit for duty supplied a ship's guard consisting of three officers, a sergeant, a corporal, and six other ranks, to protect the ship's armoury and keep troops away from out-of-bounds areas. Besides this there were lifeboat guards, ship's police, pickets; fatigues for the bakehouse, the butchery, the galleys. Petrol Company supplied its own mess orderlies, took turns at scrubbing decks, cleaning latrines, mopping out shower rooms. With all this went the endless 'Do's' and 'Don'ts' of routine orders, all manner of checks and inspections, and every so often another jab from the MO's needle. So one way and another the voyage was no Cook's Tour, despite the rosy versions that appeared in some home papers.

In two-hour watches throughout the day submarine lookouts scanned the water within a mile of the ship, seeking torpedoes or periscopes. Also manned during hours of daylight were machine-gun posts for protection against attack by low-flying aircraft. Gunners were forbidden to fire, however, without specific orders from a ship's officer on the bridge.

In their off-duty hours the troops did not lack amusement. Like soldiers everywhere they gambled at cards and dice, despite official vetoes and occasional swoops by the Military Police. Needless to say, these measures were generally foiled by the watchfulness of the soldiery; so poker, pontoon, crown-and-anchor and the like continued to flourish, along with housie-housie. This had official sanction and was heavily patronised, some schools numbering well over a hundred.

Deck-games and sports contests also had their vogue, while there were swimming carnivals, 'race meetings' (complete with totalisator), concerts, films, community singing. For the quieter types there were books to read, letters to write; long yarns with cronies on a lee deck, or

over a pot of ale; hours spent watching the swirl of wake and waters, endlessly fascinating at night, when a phosphorescent fire lit the surface; while close by crept those faint ghosts, the other vessels, with no light showing in the whole vast silent convoy.

Friday, 12 January, brought a ripple of excitement. Early risers saw land, and a lighthouse, only a few chains off. For many, this view of Wilson's Promontory, south-east of Melbourne, was their first sight of another country, and they gazed enthralled. Others took one look at the now-heaving waters and returned in haste to their bunks. **Australia** could wait... or sink, if it liked! During the night a wind had risen. The day broke cold and boisterous, and continued that way. On the starboard bow HMS *Ramillies* slashed her way through mounting waves in a slather of foam, a magnificent sight. At midday the *Empress of Japan* nosed out from Port Phillip Bay and joined the convoy.

Next day the wind abated. The ships cleared **Bass Strait** and entered the Australian Bight. Though still cool the weather was pleasant, especially in the sun on a lee side; and sun-bathers crowded the upper decks. But the fine spell was short-lived. Sunday the 14th was the roughest day out, with high seas and a howling wind. All parades except boat-drill were cancelled. Attendances at mess reached an all-time low. That day Petrol Company received their white ASC shoulder flashes. Badges also were issued—of good design, but poor material, one driver records. Sergeant Greig continues:

10th Day Out, Monday, 15/1/40

Sea moderating somewhat. Feel better again, thank Heaven! Quite a few chaps were down to it yesterday and last night. Thank goodness we have decent quarters; it would not be so good in an old-fashioned troopship! ! !

Petrol Company for duty today. Relieved Harry [Barnett] as Guard Sgt for a few hours to allow him to lecture. Very quiet day on the whole.

Quite a few porpoises about.

Boat drill parade 8.40 p.m. Was not quite dark but anticipate we will be having an emergency call one night before long. The clocks go back another hour tonight—this puts us four hours behind New Zealand time now.

11th Day Out, Tuesday, 16/1/40

Rather a rough sort of night. We were broadside on to the weather for some hours last night, and one damned near rolled out of bed. The ship groaned and creaked, doors were slamming all night and I could not sleep after 4 a.m. However, I was not sick, and feel O.K. this morning. At the same time I have just realised that I have cut out smoking!

We had a mock aeroplane attack this morning and all had to keep below decks.

Many of us are feeling sick—not from seasickness but possibly after-effects of vaccination.

All ranks are looking forward to getting into **Fremantle—even though we probably won't get leave it will be good to see shore life once again from the distance.**

Excitement mounted as Z4 approached **Fremantle. Men crammed the rails, and those with binoculars scanned the horizon. Late in the morning of 18 January land was sighted. By 5 p.m. the *Orion* had berthed; and the news soon spread round: 'Shore leave for all, until midnight'. Then—trust the Army—there was a hold-up, over pay. Petrol Company, like the rest, were broke. Must they go ashore like that? It seemed so. Then, at last, the happy word came: 'Pay in the Orderly Room at 2000 hours.' Each other rank drew one pound Australian and was debited 16s. in his paybook, his 'earnings' having been put on a sterling basis from the time he left New Zealand.**

Fortunately for the troops, hotels and business places stayed open

late; so in both **Perth** and **Fremantle** the men saw 'beer and soldiers everywhere'. Military brass-hats took a tolerant view of any exuberant horseplay, while the citizens were amused and happy to watch the antics of this first contingent—the forerunner of many—to arrive from 'the other side'. Magnificently they played **Australia's** traditional role of Big Brother to the New Zealanders, helping rather than hindering the high jinks, and contriving to keep the visitors out of trouble, if not out of mischief. While most soldiers were pretty well behaved, many were 'jobs' by the time leave ceased at midnight; and with the Company rostered as unit for duty, some went on guard straight away... a poor preparation for next day's 'star turn'.

This was the now-famous march from **Fremantle** to **Perth** by all troops from Z4. Before they left the ship the men were given the option of marching to **Perth** or staying on board. It was a chance to get extra leave ashore and most chose to march, even though they would be marching in army boots for the first time after a fortnight in deck shoes—to say nothing of their capers the night before.

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city just three hours forty minutes after leaving the ship's side.

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Enough said! Let's pull up the curtain.

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The magazine also contained side-kicks in verse and prose at prominent personalities; aspersions on shipboard and army life; and the following satire, redolent of an era now past, on German propaganda reports:

PETROL COMPANY

UNOFFICIAL WAR NEWS – (PER LATRINOGRAM)

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One of the heaviest air attacks in the present war was launched on a German port by the Allies yesterday. According to a German radio station, no fewer than 50 British planes took part in the attack. On the approach of the enemy, ^{TWO} German fighter planes intercepted the British squadrons and successfully drove off the invaders, twelve of which were shot down and 19 were seen to disappear over the horizon in flames. The German machines both returned to their base undamaged. The Iron Cross was not awarded to the German airmen as such victories have now become an everyday occurrence.

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And, again with Charlie Graham ‘in the gun’:

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That made me feel quite blue.
Before my face it reared its head,
A head that turned quite pink,
And a voice from through the whiskers said,
'Your denims simply stink!'**

PETROL COMPANY

CHAPTER 3 – ‘THE GORGEOUS EAST’

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'The Gorgeous East'

KEEPING fit was the order of the day as the convoy headed for Colombo. Unauthorised items of equipment, e.g., Aussie badges and slouch hats, were called in, and shipboard routine continued as before. On 27 January—a clear, sunny Saturday—Petrol Company held its swimming-pool sports, the main events being contests on the greasy pole and diving for spoons.

That afternoon a race meeting, complete with 'tote' and printed programmes, was held for the whole ship on 'A' Deck. Six races—five heats and a final—were run for the Z4 Cup, won by Petrol Company with their 'nag' Quin's Post. Their jockey, **Corporal Gilmore**,¹ was tipped as a good safe man, straight as a die; and one of his followers, backing solidly on the sixpenny tote, won eighteen shillings—the price of fifty-four canteen beers. The meeting went as briskly as a day at Riccarton or Ellerslie, and sixpences were hazarded with reckless abandon.

THE ORION RACING CLUB

INDIAN OCEAN MEETING

Programme of Races

| I PAPA KURA STAKES | | |
|--|---|-------------------------|
| Nominator | Horse | Jockey |
| 1. Cpl T. G. Clarke's (HQ Coy) | DIRTY BUTTONS By Nitwit out of Stupidity | Pte Daniels |
| 2. Div Petrol Coy's | BLISTERS By Route March out of Army Boots | Pte H. Parkin |
| 3. Hon. K. S. Thompson's(A Coy) | THIRST By Route March out of Fremantle | Steve Goodmanson |
| 4. Div Ammunition Coy's | LAST SHOT By Big Gun out of Ammunition | Pte H. Brady |
| 5. W. E. Waine's | HAURAKI By Kia Kaha out of Dirty Dixie | Darky Lawson |

II QUIN'S POST SADDY

II QUIN'S POST SCURRY

| Nominator | Horse | Jockey |
|-------------------------|--|---------------------------|
| 1. Div Petrol Coy's | NO LEAVE By French Leave out of Trentham | Sgt L. C. H. Cowen |
| 2. Aga Preston's | GENERAL MALAISE By Vaccination out of Emmo | Hector Bevin |
| 3. Div Ammunition Coy's | MANY MILES By Cripes out of New Zealand | Sgt N. F. Chissell |
| 4. Nawab of Anderson's | MASTER ANZAC By Enzed out of After Perth | Steve Hankin |
| 5. Res Motor Trsp Coy's | TAWDRY By Badges out of Jewel Packet | Sgt Thompson |

III ROSE STREET GUINEAS

| Nominator | Horse | Jockey |
|----------------------------------|--|--------------------------|
| 1. Pte Gumdigger's (C Coy) | GLITTERING By Glen Allen's Pride out of Brasso | Ray Gibb |
| 2. Res Motor Trsp Coy's | HOPE By Rum out of Jar | Pte Reynolds |
| 3. Happy Alf Hanscombe's (D Coy) | HANDLE By Barman out of Barrel Tap | Wee Angus Mackay |
| 4. Div Petrol Coy's | QUIN'S POST By Hophead out of Barrel | Cpl A. A. Gilmore |
| 5. Hon. Simple Simon's (I Reinf) | PUKKAH SOLDIER By Detail out of Reinforcement | Hector Blundell |

IV WAIT-FOR-AGE HANDICAP

| Nominator | Horse | Jockey |
|----------------------------|--|--------------------|
| 1. Major M. Petrie's | PRIDE OF By CO's Orders out of Dormitory | Tiny Matheson |
| 2. Lieut-Col S. H. Crump's | SCRIM By Scram out of Tirau | Capt Hood |
| 3. Major J. Peart's | GRAY NURSE By Colonel Scar out of Sonoma | Sonoma Bob |
| 4. Capt G. H. Whyte's | DAZE By Changing Orders out of Orderly Room | Lieut F. H. Muller |
| 5. Major W. Evans' | SENSATION By Burst out of Bathing Costume | Mo Sutton |

V THE 5 P.M. COMMODORE'S CANTER

| Nominator | Horse | Jockey |
|-------------------------|---|-----------------|
| 1. Div Ammunition Coy's | DISCIPLINE By Perspiration out of OC | Pte F. J. Wells |
| 2. Cpl Bristow's | MEN'S MESS By Stew out of Scrag | Pte Harland |

- | | | |
|--------------------------|--|------------|
| 3. Res Motor Trsp Coy's | SANDY'S FURY By Over the Fence out of Trentham | Pte Annear |
| 4. Sgt Robinson's(Bn HQ) | CARLSBERG By Barrel out of Auckland | Pte Gentil |
| 5. Div ASC HQ's | HAIR CUT By Just out of Mt Eden | Pte Reid |

VI THE Z-4 CUP

1. Winner of First Race: **DIRTY BUTTONS**
2. Winner of Second Race: **NO LEAVE**
3. Winner of Third Race: **QUIN'S POST**
4. Winner of Fourth Race: **PRIDE OF**
5. Winner of Fifth Race: **HAIR CUT**

Winner: **QUIN'S POST**

By now the Company knew that its destination was the **Middle East**.

The men attended lectures by the MO and others on life and ways in Egypt—that 'Land of Sin, Sand, and Syphilis'. They listened respectfully and made their own resolutions, though not always on the lines their superiors intended. On 28 January, at 9.55 p.m., the *Orion* crossed the Equator. Two days later the convoy reached Colombo.

This was for most men their first acquaintance with 'the gorgeous East' and they gazed enthralled. The colour, the palm-trees, the sprawling city, the vast conglomeration of shipping—cruisers, liners, tugs; barges and sampans—brewed a potent magic. And like magic, too, appeared a swarm of dancing small craft, piled high with bananas, oranges, pine-apples, coconuts; cigars and cigarettes; curios. Brisk bargaining followed; and the troops, well-placed for the use of plunging fire, hurled down banter, abuse, orange skins, pineapple tops, and a little small-change. They had just been paid in annas and rupees—another enchanting novelty—but only to the tune of sixteen shillings; so they could not afford to be lavish.

Before going on leave the men had been solemnly adjured to spend the lot, for **Ceylon** money would not be accepted later by the ship's canteens. They were also warned against (a) the risk of venereal and other diseases then rife in Colombo; and (b) unseemly behaviour, which might lower the prestige of **Ceylon's** white minority. With these provisos,

and to the full extent of their sixteen shillings, the city was theirs until 4.30 p.m.

Petrol Company personnel left the ship by lighter at 11 a.m. and as they approached the shore, Lionel Stubbs² recalls, they saw a detachment of Aussies converging on the same wharf. It was a toss-up which barge would be the first to make it, and the troops eyed each other. 'Although we had travelled in the same convoy, these were the first Aussie troops we'd seen, in bulk. We were curious. Both lots remained silent; then, when we were only a stone's throw apart, one big Kiwi burst out: "You ugly-looking pack of B—'s." Suitable replies were received from the Aussies!'

British residents of Colombo extended hospitality, some on a lavish scale. But white faces were few amid the seething mass of undersized natives—the great unwashed—jostling, jabbering, gesticulating; driving their giant-wheeled bullock-carts through crowded streets; plying various trades upon the side-walks; spitting out streams of scarlet betel juice. The soldiery milled through the squalid warrens of the native quarter, where filthy tenements housed hordes of humans. Petrol Company men roamed the city, frequented bars and eating-places. They watched the snake-charmers, and haggled with natives for knick-knacks to send back home. Some rode in rickshaws, sometimes racing similar vehicles pulled by brawny Aussies, while petrified coolies—the erstwhile steeds—sat goggle-eyed inside.

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But no chance arose for anything but wishful thinking; and the party proceeded on a mission that turned out to be no picnic. They spent two gruelling hours mounting and descending companionways, tramping decks, inspecting gun-turrets, engine-rooms, boilers, propeller shafts—all

this round midday, close to the Equator, with water, water all around, and not a drop to drink—no beer, anyway. *Sussex*, they learned, had trailed the *Admiral Graf Spee* in the South Atlantic, and had been unlucky to miss contact by a mere hundred miles.

No leave from Z4 on this second day, and Divisional Petrol Company struck guard again. Routine orders announced the promotion of Sergeant H. W. Barnett, D (Workshops) Section, to staff-sergeant, this winning general approval as Harry was popular with both officers and men. He also knew his stuff as a mechanist-instructor. Next day (1 February) the convoy left Colombo, escorted by the *Ramillies*, *Sussex* and *Hobart*, and with a new member, the French troopship *Athos II*, bound for French Somaliland. Another addition to the fleet was the aircraft-carrier *Eagle*, one of whose planes dived, later on, into the **Red Sea**.

By now the novelty of shipboard life was beginning to wear thin. The discomforts, and the continual heat, became oppressive. Some sought to offset these with more work. They formed themselves into volunteer groups for extra practice with the LMGs and the sergeants found their spare-time and their cabins cluttered with tiresome enthusiasts. So all were relieved when the *Orion*, *Rangitata* and three Australian transports put into **Aden** on 8 February to refuel.

By noon next day all ships were at sea again, and by late afternoon land became visible on either side. The convoy was passing through the Straits of Bab-el-Mandeb. Dhows flitted by, felucca-rigged. Tankers, and grubby tramp steamers, plied there in the narrows between Arabia and **Africa**. The first stage of the Company's Odyssey was nearly done. Ahead lay Egypt and the testing-grounds of war; and one driver wrote in a letter home: 'We shall soon see what the ASC is made of. Hope we turn out all right!'

The church service of Sunday, 11 February, was the last one aboard Transport Z4. Colonel Crump then told the troops that their camp would be at **Maadi**, about a dozen miles south of **Cairo**. They would arrive, he

said, at **Port Tewfik (Suez)** the following night, disembark on Tuesday morning, and travel by train through **Cairo**. Next day the Senior MO gave a last talk on the risks of disease in Egypt, and the need for care over the 'three F's'—flies, fluids, and food.

Shipboard training ceased, and with it the grouching. All were excited, elated. Ahead lay a new land, a new life. The men went blithely about the business of packing their gear and cleaning ship. Collections were made for stewards and waiters, trophies presented to the winners of contests. There was a final flurry of inspections, farewell concerts, speeches. When dawn broke on Tuesday, 13 February, Z4 lay at **Tewfik**—and the troops took their first long look at Egypt.

What they saw there did not specially please them. The city of **Suez** was impressive enough with its large buildings and its broad expanse. No one expected it to be so big. But the people ... and their habits... whew! On wharves thick with filth, the sons of the Pharaohs scrabbled and fought one another for baksheesh—cigarettes and small-change tossed down by the soldiers. Some, ragged and dirty, brought boats alongside with fruit and other foods; but little business passed. Even the 'gully-gully' men, producing live chickens from impossible places and performing other feats of legerdemain, aroused but a passing flicker of interest.

What our men wanted was to get ashore. But their arrival in Egypt at that particular juncture was a matter of world interest, rating high diplomatic cognisance. Already the **BBC** had proclaimed the safe arrival of the New Zealand contingent at its destination. And there to welcome them at **Suez** was the GOC, **Major-General Freyberg**. With him came Mr Anthony Eden, then Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs; the British Ambassador to Egypt, Sir Miles Lampson; General Sir Archibald Wavell, GOC-in-C **Middle East**; Lieutenant-General H. M. Wilson, GOC-in-C British Troops in Egypt; and Mahmoud Azme Bey, Governor of the Canal Zone, representing the Egyptian Government. ³

Addresses of welcome were delivered, and Sir Miles read a message

from His Majesty King George VI:

**Buckingham Palace,
12th February, 1940.**

**General Officer Commanding,
2nd New Zealand Division.**

I know well that the splendid tradition established by the armed forces of New Zealand will be worthily upheld by you, who have left your homes to fight for the cause that the whole Empire has made its own.

Now that you have entered the field of active service, I send you a very warm welcome, together with my best wishes for your welfare.

GEORGE R.I.

General Freyberg replied to the speeches, and asked Mr Eden to convey a message of thanks to the King for his welcome. At noon the ASC, following the infantry, all loaded like camels, filed down the gangways into barges, each of which held 200 men. As these were filled a tug towed them in pairs to the quayside and the men scrambled ashore.

They went straight from the wharves into trains, brushing off importunate Arabs who swarmed around like flies, trying to sell chocolate, cigarettes, eggs, bread and oranges. By 1.30 p.m. Petrol Company was installed in third-class carriages with crude wooden seats, surrounded by a jumble of packs, rifles, water bottles, kitbags. Even there they found no respite from pestering Arabs, who begged and importuned through the open windows. Bolder ones who boarded the train were unceremoniously bundled off. Yet despite this discouragement and the warnings of officers, a few ingenuous Kiwis contrived to get taken down by the money-changers.

Soon the men were staring through the carriage windows at mile upon mile of dun-coloured hummocks, lacking all vestige of vegetation.

So *this* was the famous desert, stamping ground of Sheiks, of the French Foreign Legion, and all that? Not much romance about this, or about the bleak military camps they saw from time to time. **Maadi, they hoped, would turn out rather better!**

But even a desert has a beginning and an end. Their train ran on into the irrigated areas of the rich **Nile Delta, with its grass, standing crops, and groves of date palms. This was more like it! Gnarled fellaheen toiling near water-races straightened their backs to gaze at the train. The grazing herds and the patient beasts of burden—camels, oxen, asses—scarcely turned a head. They lived and worked as their kind had done for 5000 years in those self-same fields. What was another war to them, one more army, coming or going? Still less did our Soldiers matter to the timeless pyramids, now clearly visible from the carriage windows.**

At 5.10 p.m. the First Echelon marched into **Maadi Camp with bands playing. **General Freyberg** took the salute. By six o'clock the men were installed in their unit lines, with Petrol Company occupying four-man tents in the ASC area, along with 4 Reserve Mechanical Transport Company and the Divisional Ammunition Company. Unit cooks had disembarked on the previous day and gone ahead to **Maadi**; but Petrol Company's cookhouse, when the men marched in, was not yet a going concern.**

The building itself was only half-finished. Stoves were not in working order; no rations had been drawn. To quote Bill Ambrose, who had to cope with all this, 'it was like moving into an empty house—nobody knew what was what'. All the cooking utensils—dixies, boilers, urns—were still brand-new and smothered in protective grease. So for a day or two the Company fed with a 'Tommy' unit, our men travelling to and from mess by truck.

Meanwhile there were more important things to think about, as explained in this extract from the Company's first routine order in Egypt:

Compliments

(a) Care will be taken that proper compliments are paid by Guards and individuals to the British Ambassador when travelling through



Lionel Stubbs, Jerry Lyon and L. H. Lawton at Qasaba

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Jack Plumtree, an English soldier and Ivan McCullum meet the Queen
(now Queen Mother) at the Union Jack Club, London



Jack Plumtree, an English soldier and Ivan McCullum meet the Queen (now Queen Mother) at the Union Jack Club, London



In Greece: a motor transport convoy on the road between
Elevtherokhorion and Dholikhi

In Greece: a motor transport convoy on the road between [Elevtherokhorion](#) and [Dholikhi](#)

New Zealand provost on point duty, Olympus Pass



New Zealand provost on point duty, [Olympus Pass](#)

Bill Ross, 'Snowy' Guy and
'Hurricane' Harrison near Elason,
the Company's last organised
camp in Greece



Bill Ross, 'Snowy' Guy and 'Hurricane' Harrison near Elason, the Company's last organised camp in Greece

Marathon Beach, where Petrol Company was evacuated



Marathon Beach, where Petrol Company was evacuated



A German troop-carrier from which parachutists were dropped over the prison in Crete

A German troop-carrier from which parachutists were dropped over the prison in Crete



At Galatas, 20 May 1941. *From left:* Lance Green, Bill Ross, — Day, M. C. Guy, Erle Stewart, (not identified)

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The Gaol, looking towards Galatas—from a German publication, *Kreta—Sieg Der Kühnsten*



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Military Camps. The car in which he travels carries a large Union Jack in front.

(b) His Majesty the King of Great Britain, Northern Ireland, the British Dominions beyond the Seas, Emperor of India, has approved as a matter of courtesy to our Egyptian Allies that British soldiers and airmen, in uniform, should salute Egyptian officers, army and air force, when in uniform.

(c) His Majesty the King of Egypt has approved that Egyptian soldiers and airmen should salute British officers when in uniform.

Dress

(a) Service dress will be worn on all occasions, except on recreational parades.

(b) Hats, and shirts or singlets, will *always* be worn. [A bit uncomfortable for sleeping, but there was the order!]

Discipline

All ranks, before engaging taxis, MUST be in possession of sufficient money to meet the cost of the fares on arrival at destination.

Men must not remove articles such as ‘handles’ from the Canteen, and must go to the canteen properly dressed.

Currency

A certain amount of spurious coins are in circulation in Egypt, particularly 20-piastre pieces. All ranks are hereby warned not to accept 20-piastre pieces as change from any shop anywhere in **Cairo.**

But in case it be thought that service life in Egypt was just one long, lotus-eating business of bilking taxi-drivers, swiping handles from canteens, and saluting ‘our Egyptian allies’, here is the daily regime laid down in that same RO:

Routine

| | |
|-------------------|-------------|
| Reveille | 0530 |
| Roll Call | 0545 |
| Breakfast | 0630 |
| Ist Parade | 0730 |
| Dismiss | 1200 |
| Lunch | 1230 |
| 2nd Parade | 1430 |
| Dismiss | 1700 |
| Tea | 1730 |
| Tattoo | 2200 |
| Lights Out | 2215 |

The order further records:

Strength

**Marched in from HMNZT
Z-4**

Off. W.O. Sgts. O/Rs. Total

5 1 5 159 170

**Marched in, Advanced
Party**

CQ MS Broomfield, C. H.

Sgt Macphail, I. C.

Pte Cassin, P. J.

^{1 1} **2 Lt A. A. Gilmore, BEM; born Glenbrook, 9 Dec 1912; farmer; killed in action May 1941.**

^{2 2} **Sgt L. H. Stubbs; Auckland; born Oamaru, 20 Oct 1905; cartage contractor; twice wounded.**

^{3 3} **Because of its stop at Aden the *Orion* arrived at Port Tewfik after the main part of the convoy, too late to be met by the official party.**

PETROL COMPANY

[SECTION]

KEEPING fit was the order of the day as the convoy headed for Colombo. Unauthorised items of equipment, e.g., Aussie badges and slouch hats, were called in, and shipboard routine continued as before. On 27 January—a clear, sunny Saturday—Petrol Company held its swimming-pool sports, the main events being contests on the greasy pole and diving for spoons.

That afternoon a race meeting, complete with ‘tote’ and printed programmes, was held for the whole ship on ‘A’ Deck. Six races—five heats and a final—were run for the Z4 Cup, won by Petrol Company with their ‘nag’ Quin's Post. Their jockey, **Corporal Gilmore**,¹ was tipped as a good safe man, straight as a die; and one of his followers, backing solidly on the sixpenny tote, won eighteen shillings—the price of fifty-four canteen beers. The meeting went as briskly as a day at Riccarton or Ellerslie, and sixpences were hazarded with reckless abandon.

PETROL COMPANY

THE ORION RACING CLUB – INDIAN OCEAN MEETING

THE ORION RACING CLUB

INDIAN OCEAN MEETING

Programme of Races

I PAPAKURA STAKES

Nominator

Horse

Jockey

1. Cpl T. G. Clarke's (HQ Coy) **DIRTY BUTTONS** By Nitwit out of **Stupidity** Pte Daniels
2. Div Petrol Coy's **BLISTERS** By Route March out of **Army Boots** Pte H. Parkin
3. Hon. K. S. Thompson's(A Coy) **THIRST** By Route March out of **Fremantle** Steve Goodmanson
4. Div Ammunition Coy's **LAST SHOT** By Big Gun out of **Ammunition** Pte H. Brady
5. W. E. Waine's **HAURAKI** By Kia Kaha out of **Dirty Darky Lawson Dixie**

II QUIN'S POST SCURRY

Nominator

Horse

Jockey

1. Div Petrol Coy's **NO LEAVE** By French Leave out of **Trentham** Sgt L. C. H. Cowen
2. Aga Preston's **GENERAL MALAISE** By Vaccination out of **Emmo** Hector Bevin
3. Div Ammunition Coy's **MANY MILES** By Cripes out of **New Zealand** Sgt N. F. Chissell
4. Nawab of Anderson's **MASTER ANZAC** By Enzed out of **After Perth** Steve Hankin
5. Res Motor Trsp Coy's **TAWDRY** By Badges out of **Jewel Packet** Sgt Thompson

III ROSE STREET GUINEAS

Nominator

Horse

Jockey

1. Pte Gumdigger's (C Coy) **GLITTERING** By Glen Allen's Pride out of **Brasso** Ray Gibb
2. Res Motor Trsp Coy's **HOPE** By Rum out of **Jar** Pte Reynolds

- | | | |
|---|--|------------------------------|
| 3. Happy Alf Hanscombe's (D Coy) | HANDLE By Barman out of Barrel Tap | Wee Angus Mackay |
| 4. Div Petrol Coy's | QUIN'S POST By Hophead out of Barrel | Cpl A. A. Gilmore |
| 5. Hon. Simple Simon's (I Reinf) | PUKKAH SOLDIER By Detail out of Reinforcement | Hector Blundell |

IV WAIT-FOR-AGE HANDICAP

- | | | |
|---------------------------------------|--|-------------------------------|
| Nominator | Horse | Jockey |
| 1. Major M. Petrie's | PRIDE OF By CO's Orders out of Dormitory | Tiny Matheson |
| 2. Lieut-Col S. H. Crump's | SCRIM By Scram out of Tirau | Capt Hood |
| 3. Major J. Peart's | GRAY NURSE By Colonel Scar out of Sonoma | Sonoma Bob |
| 4. Capt G. H. Whyte's | DAZE By Changing Orders out of Orderly Room | Lieut F. H. Muller |
| 5. Major W. Evans' | SENSATION By Burst out of Bathing Costume | Mo Sutton |

V THE 5 P.M. COMMODORE'S CANTER

- | | | |
|------------------------------------|---|----------------------------|
| Nominator | Horse | Jockey |
| 1. Div Ammunition Coy's | DISCIPLINE By Perspiration out of OC | Pte F. J. Wells |
| 2. Cpl Bristow's | MEN'S MESS By Stew out of Scrag | Pte Harland |
| 3. Res Motor Trsp Coy's | SANDY'S FURY By Over the Fence out of Trentham | Pte Annear |
| 4. Sgt Robinson's (Bn HQ) | CARLSBERG By Barrel out of Auckland | Pte Gentil |
| 5. Div ASC HQ's | HAIR CUT By Just out of Mt Eden | Pte Reid |

VI THE Z-4 CUP

- 1. Winner of First Race: DIRTY BUTTONS**
- 2. Winner of Second Race: NO LEAVE**
- 3. Winner of Third Race: QUIN'S POST**
- 4. Winner of Fourth Race: PRIDE OF**
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Winner: QUIN'S POST

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Meanwhile there were more important things to think about, as explained in this extract from the Company's first routine order in Egypt:

Compliments

(a) Care will be taken that proper compliments are paid by Guards and individuals to the British Ambassador when travelling through



Lionel Stubbs, Jerry Lyon and L. H. Lawton at Qasaba

Lionel Stubbs, Jerry Lyon and L. H. Lawton at Qasaba

Jack Plumtree, an English soldier and Ivan McCullum meet the Queen
(now Queen Mother) at the Union Jack Club, London



Jack Plumtree, an English soldier and Ivan McCullum meet the Queen (now Queen Mother) at the Union Jack Club, London



In Greece: a motor transport convoy on the road between
Elevation and Dholikhi

In Greece: a motor transport convoy on the road between Elevation and Dholikhi

New Zealand provost on point duty, Olympus Pass



New Zealand provost on point duty, Olympus Pass



Bill Ross, 'Snowy' Guy and
'Hurricane' Harrison near Elason,
the Company's last organised
camp in Greece

Bill Ross, 'Snowy' Guy and 'Hurricane' Harrison near Elason, the Company's last organised camp in Greece

Marathon Beach, where Petrol Company was evacuated



Marathon Beach, where Petrol Company was evacuated



A German troop-carrier from which parachutists were dropped over the prison in Crete

A German troop-carrier from which parachutists were dropped over the prison in Crete



At Galatas, 20 May 1941. From left: Lance Green, Bill Ross, — Day, M. C. Guy, Erle Stewart, (not identified)

At Galatas, 20 May 1941. From left: lance Green, Bill Ross, — Day, M. C. Guy, Erle Stewart, (not identified)

The Gaol, looking towards Galatas—from a German publication, *Kreta—Sieg Der Kühnsten*



The Gaol, looking towards Galatas—from a German publication, *Kreta—Sieg Der Kühnsten*



Military Camps. The car in which he travels carries a large Union Jack in front.

(b) His Majesty the King of Great Britain, Northern Ireland, the British Dominions beyond the Seas, Emperor of **India, has approved as a matter of courtesy to our Egyptian Allies that British soldiers and airmen, in uniform, should salute Egyptian officers, army and air force, when in uniform.**

(c) His Majesty the King of Egypt has approved that Egyptian soldiers and airmen should salute British officers when in uniform.

Dress

(a) Service dress will be worn on all occasions, except on recreational parades.

(b) Hats, and shirts or singlets, will *always* be worn. [A bit uncomfortable for sleeping, but there was the order!]

Discipline

All ranks, before engaging taxis, **MUST be in possession of sufficient money to meet the cost of the fares on arrival at destination.**

Men must not remove articles such as ‘handles’ from the Canteen, and must go to the canteen properly dressed.

Currency

A certain amount of spurious coins are in circulation in Egypt, particularly 20-piastre pieces. All ranks are hereby warned not to accept 20-piastre pieces as change from any shop anywhere in **Cairo.**

But in case it be thought that service life in Egypt was just one long, lotus-eating business of bilking taxi-drivers, swiping handles from canteens, and saluting ‘our Egyptian allies’, here is the daily regime laid down in that same RO:

Routine

Reveille 0530
Roll Call 0545
Breakfast 0630
Ist Parade 0730
Dismiss 1200
Lunch 1230
2nd Parade 1430
Dismiss 1700
Tea 1730
Tattoo 2200
Lights Out 2215

The order further records:

Strength

Marched in from HMNZT

Z-4

Off. W.O. Sgts. O/Rs. Total

5 1 5 159 170

Marched in, Advanced

Party

CQ MS Broomfield, C. H.

Sgt Macphail, I. C.

Pte Cassin, P. J.

PETROL COMPANY

CHAPTER 4 – DESERT TRAINING

CHAPTER 4

Desert Training

ENSCONCED in their four-man ridge tents at **Maadi**, Petrol Company's first echelon quickly settled down to the business of fitting themselves for desert warfare. There were scant amenities—few completed roads or buildings, scarcely a canteen or **YMCA**. The Company shared a **NAAFI** in the 27 (MG) Battalion area and found the beer worth buying at 3 piastres (about 7 ½ d.) a bottle. Equipment of all kinds was short; as one observer noted, months passed before they heard of a G1098 (the synopsis of the complete equipment of a unit, itemised and enumerated) and started to get a trickle of its components.

Electricity was laid on to Divisional and Brigade Headquarters, but not to unit lines. So Petrol Company, like the rest, drew hurricane lamps from the QM store and adjusted themselves to a return to the kerosene age. Water-supply was sketchy at first, but improved as more connections were made to showers and ablution stands. Shaving out-of-doors proved irksome in a climate where lather quickly dried on the face and then just blew away; but unfortunately the whiskers remained. Troops were warned against bathing—or even wading—in the River Nile, or in any pool or canal, ‘the waters of which’, stated an RO, ‘all arise from the dangerous waters of the **Nile**’. Grim tales of bilharzia sufficed to deter most; while the human pollution they saw was more than enough for others.

Because of the heat, the Camp Baths were popular; but with a high incidence of otitis media and sinusitis among troops (including some in Petrol Company) high diving was forbidden; the water in the baths was chlorinated. Drinking water appeared in large earthenware jars, called zeers, which stood on iron tripods in unit lines. Strangely enough, the sun's heat cooled the water in these by evaporating the see page on the outer surface. But zeers soon became suspect as breeding- places for mosquitoes, while the communal mug used for drinking from them was officially condemned. On the other hand, melons, which had been

banned as thirst-quenchers, were now approved so long as they were purchased from 'reliable sources'.

At that stage **Italy** had not entered the war, and her intentions had to be reckoned with. In Libya, just over the Egyptian border, Marshal Balbo commanded a large army, estimated at nine full divisions, with several hundred tanks and more than 1000 guns. The Italians also had transport and numerous planes. There seemed little to stop Balbo from occupying Egypt and seizing the **Suez Canal**.

In the face of this danger, elaborate plans were worked out for the defence of **Maadi Camp** and the nearby city of **Cairo**, especially against air attack and parachute landings. Ack-ack posts were mounted; troops carried respirators and steel helmets; they stood-to at dawn and dusk. They dug and manned slit trenches, practised dispersal of transport. Petrol Company shared in these activities, at the same time pressing on with a training course of parades, infantry training, weapon training and route marches. They engaged, besides, in two other important activities: the ferrying of Divisional transport (including vehicles for the Second and Third Echelons) from delivery points in the Canal Zone, and they attended specialist schools and courses.

On 4 March D Section (Workshops) under Staff-Sergeant Barnett marched out for trade testing at RASC Heavy Repair Workshops, **Abbassia**. Most of them qualified as fitters, electricians, carpenters, coppersmiths, and so on. The following week a party led by Sergeants Greig and Macphail left for a supply and general duties course at RASC Training Centre, **Moascar**. Corporal **McEwan**¹ qualified as a physical training instructor at a course in **Helmieh**; Corporal **May**² passed a course in sanitary duties; Driver **Wallace**³ took a water-duty course with 2/1 Field Hygiene Section; CSM Graham marched out, first to a unit gas instructors' course at **Middle East Training School, Abbassia**, then to Middle East Weapon Training School, Palestine. Sergeant Greig became acting CSM.

Petrol Company drivers, headed by an officer or senior NCO, plied

between **Maadi** and the Vehicle Reception Depots at **Port Said**, **Alexandria** and **Moascar**. Their job was the vital one of putting the Division on wheels. In 1940 practically all vehicles in that theatre of war were British makes, mostly 3-ton Bedfords. There was a smaller number of Morrises, mainly ambulances, and a few new Chevrolets. The bulk of the Bedfords had already done a considerable mileage in the Middle East by June 1940, and of these, most had been impressed from civilian sources. When war broke out, about 500 Chevs, all brand-new and still crated, were on hand in the **Middle East** under a peacetime contract, ready for just such a contingency.

Vehicles from **Britain** invariably arrived on wheels, ready to be driven away. American vehicles on the other hand arrived cased, and were assembled at **Alexandria**, **Port Said**, or **Ataqa**, near **Suez**, which had a large Vehicle Assembly Unit. All vehicles were then taken to Vehicle Reception Depots at Tel-el-Kebir, **Amiriya**, or **Abbassia** for issuing. Most American makes were distributed from Tel-el-Kebir.

Also being used in Egypt then were some 10-ton Macks and Whites. Most of these arrived at **Haifa**, in Palestine, where they were assembled and driven down to the Canal. Some thirty or forty of the Macks, however, were landed and assembled at **Basra**, on the Persian Gulf, where all the British 10-tonners— Fodens, Leylands and Albions—also arrived. From there they were railed to **Baghdad**, then driven across **Iraq**, **Transjordan** and Palestine on a 1600-mile journey to Egypt. Nearly 500 miles of this was across desert tracks, while a large section of the journey followed the oil pipeline which runs from **Iraq** to Haifa. Under a treaty with **Iraq**, British troops and transport had right-of-way through that country, but could not be stationed there.

The pipeline, of course, carried crude oil to refineries in **Haifa**, where it was converted into petrol, kerosene, and other products. These were shipped to bulk storage installations near Egyptian ports. Refineries near **Suez** treated crude oil from the **Red Sea** area. Later in the war, oil fuel was also drawn from Abadan, in the Persian Gulf.

Refined petrol went to base areas in bulk, by rail or road tanker, to be decanted into storage tanks at the pumps or petrol supply points. Later, a British War Department pipeline was built for pumping petrol direct from **Suez** to the **Cairo** installations. For operational purposes, the Supply and Transport (Petrol) directorate at GHQ MEF had the refined petrol packed in four-gallon expendable 'flimsies'—known only too well to Petrol Company in the first three years of the war. The cans were made at factories near the bulk installations, and filled at **Alexandria**, **Suez**, **Haifa** and **Beirut**.

As every **Middle East** veteran knows, these four-gallon packs were far from satisfactory. They were too frail to stand up to desert conditions, to the continual loading and unloading, the tossing and dropping which they inevitably received. So, in the first few years, wastage of petrol from leaky containers was estimated at 30 or 40 per cent. Various methods were tried for 'clothing' the flimsies, protecting them with cardboard sheaths and light wooden crates, in an effort to stem these losses. But none proved successful; and no real answer to the problem was found until finally pressed steel containers were used. ⁴

Leave trips to **Cairo** and the Delta gave opportunities to examine more closely the 'wonders of the East'. Petrol Company investigations were not all purely academic, and enlightenment sometimes came through sore heads, or broken ones. Like their fathers before them they revelled in the fleshpots of Egypt, and shared the same urge to pull **Cairo** apart. Large Tommy Redcaps usually prevented this, and sometimes they were pulled apart instead—'they' being the Redcaps, the Kiwis, or both. The provocative Wog usually managed to escape.

His red fez or tarboosh, symbol of his faith, fascinated our troops, and often they would swipe one while swishing past in taxicab or gharry. Such acts evoked stern words in routine orders, and harsh threats against those who 'molested or interfered in any manner whatever with natives of any class, colour or creed'.

The orders said nothing about civilians who molested soldiers. So

Abdul, Ahmud and Co. Went right on plaguing our lads with offers of wristlet watches, fountain pens, postcards and pornographic pictures or 'literature'. To thrust off the importuners or land a well-placed punt always brought on such a hullabaloo (shared by the entire civilian population, and sooner or later the provost) that the experiment was seldom repeated. For the more opulent there were lush precincts where (while money lasted) one could sample 'the magic of the Arabian nights, the sport of Sultans'. This usually consisted of watching the gyrating navels of the dancing-girls.

In camp, Petrol Company, like good soldiers everywhere, acquired small bits of this and that—unconsidered trifles which no one had bothered to bolt down or place under armed guard—to make tent life more tolerable. But that, also, failed to please the authorities. They bluntly decreed that 'no timber will be removed from buildings or the vicinity thereof'; and a certain Petrol Company staff-sergeant, who had built himself a quite creditable table, was required to dismantle same and return its component parts to their former position. This urge to wage war in comfort was very marked among our troops, but not always understood by soldiers from other countries. One British serviceman described the Kiwi as 'a long-legged bird that roams the desert chirping "Loot! Loot! Loot!"' In such matters Petrol Company were no worse than the rest; but the possession of transport did give them an advantage.

Camp life also brought its sprinkling of misdemeanours, its 'conduct to the prejudice, etc. etc.' and its 'neglect, ditto, ditto', always prefixed with the ominous cabala: WOAS. One Petrol Company driver got in smartly for his first week's CB, garnished with packdrill, and a fortnight's leave stoppage, just two days after arriving in Egypt. Another quickly won sixty days in the Glasshouse, sweating it out in that king of detention barracks, the Citadel. In those grim confines, whose massive walls and tall towers could be plainly seen from **Maadi, heart-less Tommy NCOs strove to make their guests unhappy. So salutary was the regime, in fact, that one New Zealand colonel considered sending his whole battalion in, by relays, on some charge or other.**

One feature of this era was a spate of ceremonial parades, generally held on a Saturday. The first took place on 24 February, when General Wavell inspected the First Echelon. With him were **General Freyberg** and Brigadier Puttick.⁵ Petrol Company put on a good show, and afterwards the C-in-C gave officers and senior NCOs a talk on the war situation. He intimated that the New Zealanders' immediate role would be the defence of the **Suez Canal**. A week later **2 NZEF** was inspected by Lieutenant-General H. M. Wilson, GOC British Troops in Egypt. A march-past in column of sections, done for the first time by the whole contingent, proved quite impressive. Again the parade was followed by an address, which promised action for the New Zealanders but still suggested that their part would be mainly defensive. On the following Saturday—the third in a row—came yet another formal inspection, this time by Sir Miles Lampson, His Britannic Majesty's Ambassador to Egypt.

On 25 March a **2 NZEF** rugby fifteen, captained by the All Black, Jack **Griffiths**,⁶ defeated a Combined Services team by 20 to nil. Several Petrol Company nominees had gone into training for this event, and one, Roy **Knowles**,⁷ was selected to play on the wing. Sport within the Company also flourished, and by 8 April Petrol Company had formed its own sports committee comprising one NCO and two men from each section. Boxing, football, hockey and swimming all developed; while **Maadi** townsfolk (always great friends to our Middle East men) offered tennis, golf and yachting. Petrol Company's **Corporal Gilmore** added to his athletic laurels by competing successfully at open contests in **Cairo**.

Among camp 'amusements' was that celebrated institution, Shafto's Cinema. Its cacophonous sound-tracks, belting full blast through asthmatic amplifiers, caused annoyance over a wide area, while scarcely entertaining the patrons within. So often were the troops not amused, in fact, that wrecking the cinema became a popular pastime, usually following some technical hitch which had led to the abandonment of the programme without recompense to the customers. So, as one jester observed, the troops took Shafto's apart to see what didn't make it go.

The camp NAAFI's, too, had their own special brands of entertainment. Most popular were the legal ones—beer and housie-housie. But crown-and-anchor (“Two bob on the hook!”) ran them a good second, with Slippery Sam, pontoon, and other illicit games well up in the field. When it became known that some operators were remitting hundreds of pounds back home to New Zealand, authority took a stand. But gambling has always flourished in armies, and men will bet on anything— cards, horses, the daily tally of bed-bugs.

Gallons of weak tea were purchased in the NAAFI's and drunk out of cut-down beer bottles. Biscuits, cigarettes, and chocolate were stocked, while more substantial viands, such as steak and eggs, were advertised. But George Wog behind the **NAAFI** counter had no intention of providing those if he could avoid it. He first took the line that the soldier could not (or would not) pay; for the dishes cost seven or eight piastres at least—and who in his right mind would pay that much for food after the Army had already fed him?

Moved from this point by much loud abuse, and the flourishing of akkers, George then raised the question of how you would take your viands—in your hand or in your eye; a curly one, that, since the management provided neither plates nor cutlery. Having countered this by producing your own mess gear you then received grudgingly, and in George's own good time, your steak and eggs, Egyptian pattern. But the charred cinder he brought you bore little resemblance to steak as you knew it; nor were the little round products of the Egyptian hen at all like the eggs back home. But they made a change from army food, even though reeking with cotton-seed oil.

In those early days Petrol Company received some notable additions, one being the inimitable Driver **Dalton**.⁸ ‘Dilly’ marched in from HQ NZASC wef 2/3/40;⁹ and Div Pet was never quite the same again. Earlier on, Lieutenant A. L. Lomas, **NZMC**, became attached for rations and was welcomed back to the Company. Equally popular was Lieutenant W. M. (‘Boundary Bill’) Davis, marched in from 4 Field

Ambulance on 18 May. His unofficial exploits as an infanteer later caused the Hun some anxiety.

The trials of life as a Petrol Company NCO are recorded in Jim Greig's diary for this period; he had just been promoted acting CSM.

Maadi, Sat. 13/4/40

My birthday today. Spend morning in O/Room and generally getting into the running of things. No wonder Chas [Graham] got fed up occasionally. Everyone seems to want the CSM at the same time.... This afternoon Ian and I went to **Cairo to attend **Gen Freyberg's** party and what a great turn-out it was. About 200 officers and sgts there, and **Mrs Freyberg** made one feel quite at home. A marvellous afternoon-tea was served inside as a start-off, and did we make a meal of it! Adjourned to garden afterwards for concert by **Scots Guards** and cold beer was served in large quantities. We were received by **Gen Freyberg** and **Mrs F.** on entering, at 4 p.m., and didn't leave till 7 p.m. Even a thunderstorm and heavy rain didn't dampen our ardour and we were all reluctant to leave. Straight back to camp and shouted for the mess. At 11 p.m. camp nearly got blown down and we were two hours fixing the other tents.**

Maadi, Sun. 14/4/40

What a filthy night. I never want to see sand again. Trying to fix those damn tents was an ordeal I don't want again in a hurry. This morning it is still blowing hard and the atmosphere is just filled with sand. You could plant potatoes in the air!!!Late work tonight—got to bed at 1 a.m. Being CSM is a fair cow.

Maadi, Monday 15/4/40

Just a hard damn day's work. Unit moving to desert for three days on Wednesday. John Hunter to be OC desert unit on trial. John, Cecil and self have discussions over possibilities of operation in desert. Couple of drinks in mess after 11 p.m. with J. J. and bed finally at 1 a.m.

Maadi, Tues. 16/4/40

Hardest day's work I've had for many a long day. Op. order for desert prepared in conjunction with OC, CQMS, and self; and making out duty details, and who will and who won't go is enough to send me crazy. Up at 5 a.m. and bed at 12.30 p.m. What a day! Not a minute's spell!

Maadi-Mena Desert, Wed. 17/4/40

Half company strength move into desert today for practice training as A section. A. C. D. [Captain Dickson] and self go out in car for the day to see things started and return late afternoon, leaving Coy in desert until Friday. Route took us close to Pyramids which I saw at close range for first time. Came home very tired. After tea went to bed at 9 p.m. Alan McCook returned from Palestine today.

Maadi, Thurs. 18/4/40

A normal day, thank heavens, frightfully hot and not TOO much work. Taking it easy for a change. Coy still in desert and returning tomorrow afternoon.

Maadi, Frid. 19/4/40

Went out to desert in car with A. C. D. for couple of hours to visit Company on manoeuvres. Returned camp about 11 a.m. Sent drivers and vehicles to **Suez** for R.E. ¹⁰ stores. Company returned to camp from desert at 1400 and then pay, issue of summer clothing, shorts, etc. took up a couple of hours. Urgent message comes at 2.30 p.m. to send 26 drivers to **Port Said** by 1730 train from **Cairo**. Manage to scrape up enough and despite three days in desert they scramble round and get ready and away they go to **Port Said** quite cheerful.

The manoeuvres were a rehearsal by Petrol Company for its part in a three-day exercise which took place a week later in the **El Saff** area —'tiger country' some 30 miles south of **Maadi**.

From that exercise, the first to be held on a Divisional scale (though the Division was then at brigade strength only) the Company learned many useful lessons, and got its first practical experience at supplying and operating a petrol point. The exercise was planned as one phase in a war between the armed forces of 'Puttagonia', commanded by Brigadier Puttick, and those of 'Milesia', led by the NZ CRA, Brigadier Miles.¹¹ 'The proceedings', wrote General Kippenberger,¹² in his *Infantry Brigadier*, 'ended with an Anzac Day morning service where the General prayed for an early chance to go for the Hun and clearly pointed out to the Almighty that we had been waiting for a long time.'

One thing Petrol Company found from this experience was that road transport work is vastly different from driving in the desert. There a driver must learn to distinguish hard ground from, soft; to know the tricks that wind plays with loose sand; to negotiate bad patches (by easing his vehicle slantwise across sharp depressions) so as not to damage springs, 'diff', or gearbox.

Drivers learned to spot treacherous places from afar, and either to skirt around them—not always possible when travelling in convoy—or else to approach at the optimum speed for that type of country. They found that a heavy foot on the accelerator seldom paid; and that this practice, instead of bulldozing them out of their troubles, usually caused the truck to dig in and settle down firmly on its back axle. Then the perspiring driver (and his cursing offsider) could be sure of having the devil's own job getting it to budge again.

In such cases the shovel and the sand-tray (if any) were a man's best friends; while the stunted desert camel-scrub (again, if any) could be used to give the back wheels something to grip on.

In convoy it was essential to keep a sharp eye on the truck ahead. Vehicles had a habit of vanishing in the desert, since this turned out to be scarcely ever flat, as one expected, but folded; and studded with surprisingly large hummocks round which a truck could disappear in a twinkling, leaving one with a fifty-fifty guess as to whether it had turned

to the right or the left. In time our drivers acquired a 'desert sense' or, better still, a prismatic compass, which eliminated guesswork and reduced almost to nil the chances of getting lost. But at first there was 'strife' and the occasional damaged vehicle.

One Company driver, with a stove-in radiator, explained to his sergeant that another truck had suddenly loomed up in the darkness ahead of him.

'Loo-oo-oomed!' roared the incensed NCO. 'So something loomed, did it? When things start looming, my boy, it's time you were on the ground. Report for duty with the sanitary squad. Loo-oomed, indeed!'

On Thursday, 2 May, the Company commenced its summer training programme, with reveille at 5.30 a.m., an early morning parade before breakfast, and a siesta after lunch. The siesta was compulsory, and duly laid down in routine orders; but with in-the-shade temperatures ranging to 110 degrees and over, and all metalwork exposed to the sun becoming too hot to touch, little compulsion was needed. On bed-boards in their stuffy tents, the men lay near-naked, with perspiration streaming from them. The tea they drank poured straight out again through their skins. **Maadi** became unbearable. Twenty per cent leave was granted daily from 4.30 p.m. to 1.30 a.m. A change-of-air camp opened at Sidi Bishr, near **Alexandria**.

On 7 May seventeen Petrol Company trucks, with drivers and 'spares', left **Maadi** for a PAD ¹³ exercise embracing Upper Egypt. They were attached to the Infantry Base Depot at the Citadel; the 2/10 General Hospital; RAOC, **Abbassia**; the RASC Supply Depot, **Abbassia**; and the OC Egyptian Command Signals, **Abbassia**. These detachments returned to camp on 12 May. Five days later the Company was placed on four hours' notice to move. On 29 May the first leave party returned from **Sidi Bishr**, and the second Petrol Company party moved out.

By the end of May the Company was still at **Maadi**, practising dispersal under the PAD scheme, manning LMG posts (with 500 rounds

of live ammunition to each) and doing repair work on vehicles. By this time Petrol Company's vehicle establishment was complete, except for breakdown and workshops wagons and water trailers. Soon, however, D Section was equipped with a Thornycroft workshop truck and a Thornycroft stores wagon; and the section worked flat out, Bill Ross remembers, doing urgent repair work for the Division, even during siesta periods.

About this time a number of Petrol Company tents caught fire, 'the cause in every case', routine orders averred, 'being attributable to a carelessly discarded match or cigarette butt'. By the same orders soldiers were forbidden to be tattooed in any native tattooing establishment; while the authorities noted that 'empty beer bottles and other missiles' were frequently being thrown from trains in which personnel of British Troops Egypt were travelling, 'with a possible danger of serious bodily harm being caused to any persons in the vicinity.' The practice (needless to say) was to cease forthwith... but (equally needless to mention) it didn't.

¹ **Cpl R. D. McEwan**; Stoke; born Edinburgh, 13 Aug 1918; insurance clerk.

² **Capt K. E. May**, ED and bar; **Wellington**; born **Wellington**, 21 Jun 1909; clerk.

³ **Dvr M. B. Wallace**; **Wanganui**; born **Hawera**, 24 Apr 1918; laundryman; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

⁴ At first these were the four-gallon Jerricans captured from the enemy in large quantities—about two million altogether—in North Africa, and 44-gallon drums, to the tune of about one million, from the same source. By the end of 1942, however, similar containers were being manufactured in the **Middle East**, so the tinning of petrol for the forces there ceased. This resulted in a saving of a thousand gallons daily during the Eighth Army's final campaign in North Africa, and reduced the petrol wastage

to less than 2 per cent.

⁵ Lt-Gen Sir Edward Puttick, KCB, DSO and bar, m.i.d., MC (Gk), Legion of Merit (US); **Wellington**; born **Timaru**, 26 Jun 1890; Regular soldier; NZ Rifle Bde 1914-19 (CO 3 Bn); comd **4 Bde** Jan 1940-Aug 1941; 2 NZ Div (**Crete**) 29 Apr-27 May 1941; CGS and GOC NZ Military Forces, Aug 1941-Dec 1945.

⁶ Maj **J. L. Griffiths**, MC, m.i.d.; Paraparaumu; born NZ 9 Apr 1912; bank officer; ADC to GOC 1941-45.

⁷ **Dvr R. Knowles**; **Lower Hutt**; born NZ 24 Mar 1918; cabinetmaker; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

⁸ **Dvr M. L. Dalton**; born Dunedin, 6 Sep 1916; hotel porter; deceased.

⁹ wef, with effect from.

¹⁰ Royal Engineers.

¹¹ **Brig R. Miles**, CBE, DSO and bar, MC, ED, m.i.d.; born Springston, 10 Dec 1892; Regular soldier; NZ Fd Arty 1914-19; CRA 2 NZ Div 1940-41; comd **2 NZEF (UK)** 1940; wounded and p.w. 1 Dec 1941; escaped, **Italy**, Mar 1943; died **Spain**, 20 Oct 1943.

¹² **Maj-Gen Sir Howard Kippenberger**, KBE, CB, DSO and bar, ED, m.i.d., Legion of Merit (US); born Ladbrooks, 28 Jan 1897; barrister and solicitor; **1 NZEF** 1916-17; CO **20 Bn** Sep 1939-Apr 1941, Jun-Dec 1941; comd **10 Bde, Crete**, May 1941; **5 Bde** Jan 1942-Jun 1943, Nov 1943-Feb 1944; GOC 2 NZ Div, 30 Apr-14 May 1943, 9 Feb-2 Mar 1944; comd 2 NZEF Prisoner-of-War Reception Group (**UK**) Oct 1944-Sep 1945; twice wounded; Editor-in-Chief, NZ War Histories, 1946-57; died **Wellington**, 5 May 1957.

PETROL COMPANY

CHAPTER 5 – ‘OH TO BE IN ENGLAND!’

CHAPTER 5

'Oh To Be In England!'

THE Second Echelon, which had gone into training on 12 January 1940, a week after the embarkation of the First, sailed from New Zealand on 2 May 1940. Their convoy, comprising the *Aquitania*, *Empress of Britain*, *Andes* and *Empress of Japan*, with battleship escort, was joined a few days later by the *Mauretania*, *Queen Mary* and *Empress of Canada*, carrying Australian troops.

Petrol Company shared the *Aquitania* (42,000 tons) with 28 (Maori) Battalion, 5 Field Ambulance, Divisional Supply reinforcements, and other units. All hands, including the crew, numbered 3600. Our men and the Maoris were allotted cramped quarters on the fourth deck down—an iron one, two decks below the water-line. Under them was the working alley-way where stores, engineers' equipment, and such-like were kept. There were no portholes. Wind-shutes from the upper decks provided ventilation.

The ships were heading north towards **Ceylon** when suddenly, on 15 May, the convoy changed course and made for **Capetown**. With much of **Europe** overrun, **France** demoralised, and the German forces seemingly invincible, it appeared likely that Mussolini would want to come in on the 'winning' side; and **Italy** at that time commanded the southern approach to **Suez**. So the convoy was diverted to England, via **Capetown**.

Off the shores of **Britain** the convoy was met by six destroyers, the aircraft-carrier *Argus*, and the battle-cruiser *Hood*. Then, as they moved towards a landfall in the Firth of Clyde the men caught a glimpse of the havoc of war. Driver **Mackinder**¹ wrote in a letter home:

The first traces of the war passed at 10.30 this morning [15 June]: two empty lifeboats, one upside down; dozens of empty oil drums, and timber all over the place. And now, at 12.15 p.m., we are just passing a burning ship on the horizon but can see the flames quite clearly, and huge clouds of smoke....

It is just getting dark—fancy, 9.45 p.m. and still light! This has been a day of thrills. At 2 p.m. a submarine had a try at our leading escort, but missed. You should have seen the destroyers go! They dropped a depth-charge but I'm not sure of the result. Another scare at 4.30, and our officer has just told us they had another try, but missed. At 5 p.m. there were 13 battleships with us, mostly destroyers, and at 7.30 there were 27 ships in sight.

The troops disembarked at [Glasgow](#), went by train to Edinburgh, where they halted for a meal, then crossed the border into England. At Aldershot they detrained and marched through the town, headed by a band. Petrol Company then humped their packs four miles up Longbottom Valley to a camp that had been prepared for them at Bourley. Some may have recalled that, 2000 years before, Caesar's troops from overseas had humped even heavier packs to a camp on the self-same spot.

A system of 'parent units' had been organised by the British Command to help the New Zealanders to settle in, and they soon shook down to camp routine again. But life in England then was no bed of roses. [Dunkirk](#) was just over. The gallant BEF, though saved by miracles of courage and strategy, had been hurled out of [Europe](#). It had left behind its entire equipment. And now the invasion of England was expected from day to day.

So, half-trained and only sketchily equipped, the Second Echelon prepared for its allotted role—that of GHQ Reserve. Its task was 'to counter-attack and destroy any enemy forces invading the counties of [Surrey- Kent- Sussex](#)-Hampshire which are not destroyed by the troops of Eastern and Southern Commands'. This committed our men to a last-ditch stand... or, rather, the last ditch but one; for behind them was a Home Guard, armed with pikes, truncheons and incendiary bottles!

Tough though life was for servicemen in England, the civil population found it even worse. Driver Mackinder writes:

They [relatives in England] have been raided several times, and one bomb dropped in the paddock behind them. They have been spending most of their nights in the little dugout in the back-yard. There is one to every home, the size of a decent dog-kennel, about 6' × 4' and 3' high. You open the door and back down the steps (about six) and find yourself in a little place with concrete floor, and sides about 3' high, also of concrete. The roof is of corrugated iron, nicely arched and reinforced, and with seats all round. There you sit in the dark, or with a candle in the back corner, until the 'All Clear' is sounded.

They were up until 3 a.m. the night before I arrived, 2 a.m. that night, and the next I persuaded them to go to bed. I went upstairs at 11 p.m. and was asleep in a few minutes. They came up just after and went to bed; and Arthur said he was just off to sleep when Millie wakened him and said: 'He's here again!' So up they got, dressed the three children, and away down to the dugout until the 'All Clear' went at 2.30. Then they came up to bed, but left the children down below. It is awful to see them.... the women are all played out, and the children getting disturbed almost every night.

And that was still only 1940. On 26 June Petrol Company were given forty-eight hours' disembarkation leave; meanwhile they dug slit trenches, received an issue of steel helmets. Their camp at Bourley was a combined NZASC one, with Colonel Crump in command, and Lieutenant **Coutts**² as Adjutant. Petrol Company's OC was Captain George **Hook**.³ His officers were Second-Lieutenants **Trewby**⁴ and **Collins**.⁵ Senior NCOs included CSM Ces **James**,⁶ MSM Colin Chetwin,⁷ Staff-Sergeant Claude **Keating**,⁸ and Sergeants **Almao**,⁹ **Keddell**,¹⁰ **Crawley**¹¹ and **Taaffe**.¹²

These and about 100 other ranks (some of them 'earmarked' as RMT replacements in the **Middle East**) comprised Petrol Company's second echelon. It had an LAD and its own Workshops sub-section. On 21 June an allotment of trucks and motor-cycles was picked up from Slough and

company training commenced. Then followed the inevitable 'shagging about', including a move (on 29 June) to a new camp a short distance from the main one.

July 21

.... We have had a shift and are now on our jobs, some of the boys being out practically all the time.... We left our tents behind and are now living like Gypsies in our caravans; four of us live in the Workshops truck, two on the benches and two on the floor, and could manage quite well if there was any place to put our gear, besides on top of batteries and under the lathe!

August 7

.... We have been in a different camp each of the last four nights and have another two or three to do. We travel most of the day and camp in the afternoon and evening; tea at about 9 p.m. and up at 5 a.m. Breakfast at six, and away we go; talk about Gypsies! We doss on the ground under trees or in the bush, of which there is miles, mostly parks; or sometimes on the roadsides, which are mostly lined with trees. We sneak the lorries underneath and we are home.

The weather has been perfect for the last 10 days and we are seeing new country and towns and villages all the time. You cannot go three miles without a village, some of them quite small with narrow streets and no footpaths, just room for our lorries to get through in some places. They usually have a store or two, and sometimes a public-house—but you are liable to find those anywhere, village or not.... I believe we are going back to our permanent camp tomorrow, after a week of manoeuvres.

This 'week of manoeuvres' was a Divisional exercise, commencing on 3 August, with the Army Services functioning in normal manner. The first petrol point, at Arundel Park, was



'The Galatas Heights' from the Alikianou-Canea road, looking north-east.
The feature on the left is Pink Hill, on the right Cemetery Hill. Galatas
lies behind the centre feature

**'The Galatas Heights' from the Alikianou- Canea road, looking north
—east. The feature on the left is Pink Hill, on the right Cemetery Hill.
Galatas lies behind the centre feature**

Civilian prisoners were used by the Germans to bring up supplies—
Kreta—Sieg Der Kühnsten



**Civilian prisoners were used by the Germans to bring up supplies— *Kreta—Sieg Der
Kühnsten***



Divisional Petrol Company at Helwan after evacuating Crete

Divisional Petrol Company at Helwan after evacuating Crete

Crown and Anchor cloth, embroidered by Fred Follas and autographed at Stalag VIIIIB by all the Petrol Company prisoners of war taken in Crete



Crown and Anchor cloth, embroidered by Fred Follas and autographed at Stalag VIIIIB by all the Petrol Company prisoners of war taken in Crete



Company area at Helwan
Company are at Helwan

The 5th Reinforcements, from which the Company was largely rebuilt, arrive at Port Tewfik



The 5th Reinforcements, from which the Company was largely rebuilt, arrive at Port Tewfik



Workshops Section—blacksmiths' shop, Helwan, 1941

Workshop Section—blacksmiths' shop, Helwan, 1941



Coming through the 'Corridor', 1 December 1941

late in opening due to faulty march discipline on the part of all units, and delays caused by vehicles taking wrong routes after being held up in populated areas. Happily, **Hitler** did not choose to invade that day! Subsequent movements showed a considerable improvement in convoy work. Next week seven days' privilege leave was granted—to those with sufficient credit in their paybooks.

Earlier, the NZASC had been reviewed (on 6 July) by HM King George VI, who let it be known that he was 'impressed by their fine physique, keenness and determined manner'. A number of practice, convoys had also been essayed, following a lecture on 2 July by **General Freyberg**, who stressed the need for moves by MT to threatened areas at short notice. On 19 July three drivers returned to the Petrol Company after missing the boat at **Fremantle**. They told their story to an unsympathetic court martial. On 28 July, while on convoy to Buckhurst Park, Corporal **Bailey**,¹³ on a motor-cycle, collided with another cyclist from the Divisional Supply Column and was evacuated to hospital.

By the end of August the NZASC were so practised at getting off the mark that a movement order received at 8.10 p.m. on the 27th saw them moving off in convoy by eleven o'clock. On this trip (to St Leonard's Forest) there were several air raids, but the convoy suffered no damage. Much of the route had to be travelled without lights, and in the

darkness Sergeants Crawley and Keddell, on motor-cycles, collided. Sergeant Crawley injured an ankle and was evacuated to hospital.

On 31 August the Company's tents were returned to Field Stores at Crookham and exchanged for camouflaged ones. With bombing expected on a large scale in the **Aldershot** command area, units were directed to study the possibility of obtaining greater dispersion. The Battle of **Britain** was now working up to its climax, and our men had ringside seats. One wrote in a letter home: 'One of our boys came back from **London** this morning and he saw some good dogfights there. Yesterday, he said, he saw four brought down out of a packed formation with two shells.... they were falling out of the sky like leaves off a tree.'

Another noted: 'I went into town yesterday and was in a certain place about five past six and had just had something to drink when the alarm went and we were locked in for about an hour. All the places close and everything stops; just fancy being *locked in* there!.... It has been very lively here—the largest air-raids ever known. Well, we have seen and heard the lot, the planes going over and dropping their bombs, and our AA guns in action—the noise is like a huge thunderstorm....'

On 23 September the Company received an order that twelve men were to be sent as reinforcements for the NZASC in Egypt. Those chosen were Drivers G. E. Frost, C. Bernie, V. H. Berry, J. J. Cunningham, I. W. Standen, A. D. Standen, R. O. Stewart, E. Reilly, G. N. Johnson, S. L. Faulkner, I. C. Rudduck and V. R. Sergeant. With them, as OC NZASC reinforcements, went Second-Lieutenant E. A. Collins.

This advance party—much envied for its chances of coming to grips with the enemy, especially now that the prospects of invasion were receding—joined a group comprising 175 Second Echelon men from all units. The whole echelon, in fact, had been slated for transfer to the **Middle East** in or before September; but Prime Minister Churchill interceded, maintaining that the New Zealanders were indispensable to the defence of the **United Kingdom**. Details of enemy activity and preparations across the Channel, and the savage bombing attacks on

London confirmed that impression; and following an inspection by Mr Churchill at **Mytchett** on 4 September, the New Zealand contingent was moved to **Maidstone**, closer to the threatened south-east coast, to help protect the vital area north and north-west of **Dover** and **Folkestone**.

Our men were billeted in stables, barns and appleyards. On 7 October one Petrol Company driver wrote to his wife: 'We have been having a great time until this week-end, living in a wood on the lorries, and it rained quite a bit and mud everywhere, and the big trees dripped for hours after it had stopped raining.'

'We got all packed up on Saturday morning ready to move into billets and finally got away about 3 p.m. We moved about seven miles into an old mansion of three storeys, with electric light, run by their own plant, in every room, central heating, large garage and a pit for repairs, but sadly in need of a few repairs in the water and sewerage systems. I have been a plumber all day, cleaning the cistern and trying to get the water working upstairs. Our room 10' × 10' is situated alongside the bathroom and sundries, and is all right as long as the water runs.'

'The whole Company is in the house, and there are six in our room and all our gear. You have seen sardines in a tin; well, you should see six little innocents side by side trying to sleep. But we survived it. We have seen plenty of action lately, mostly in the air, and have seen *him* passing over in dozens on his way to the Big Town. He dropped five fairly close to us last week but did no damage. There were seven air alarms in one day last week and the first "All clear" usually goes about 4.30 a.m. From then until 8 a.m. it is usually quiet. There is one buzzing around now, but I think he is going further in.'

Meanwhile the **Middle East** advance party had run into trouble. Their ship, the *Oronsay*, of 16,000 tons, carried 3000 troops and was badly overcrowded. Off the north coast of **Ireland** a lone Jerry raider swooped down and dropped three bombs, all near misses. They put the port engine out of action and temporarily disabled the starboard engine. Several men from Petrol Company who had contrived to get themselves confined in

the ship's lock-up, well down below decks, kicked a hole in the door and crawled out.

After four hours the crew got one engine working again, and the *Oronsay* limped back to Greenock. The raider machine-gunned the crowded decks, causing a number of casualties. A lookout fell from the crow's nest riddled with bullets. At a conference afterwards, Lieutenant Collins recalls, it was reported that the ship's Bren-gunners were all seasick; whereupon the British OC Troops had replied: 'You must tell your men not to be seasick. I'm not seasick'. Thereafter, the story goes, New Zealanders manned the machine guns. Seven days' survivors' leave followed this adventure, the Petrol Company quota rejoining their unit on 19 November.

By this time the Company had moved back, along with other NZEF (UK) troops, to the **Aldershot** area and were established in billets at Rowledge Farnham. There they set up a petrol point and ran daily convoys from the dump to the point. They carted salvage—empty tins and cartons—and road metal for the vehicle park, which was cutting up badly in the prevalent wet weather. On 6 November Second-Lieutenant D. C. **Ward**¹⁴ ('Dangerous Dan') joined the Company, and exactly one month later the Company paraded for his wedding to an English lass.

Meanwhile **General Freyberg** made no bones about his discontent at the splitting-up of the New Zealand Division. In units and detachments under various commands, the First Echelon was scattered over the **Western Desert** from **Cairo** to the Libyan border, from **Alexandria** to **Khartoum**. The Third Echelon (with only nineteen men for the Divisional Petrol Company) had arrived in **Maadi** on 29 September. It was time now for the New Zealanders to be concentrated, and prepared for their role as a fighting division.

Three months later the Second Echelon was still in **Britain**. But the crisis was over. The *Luftwaffe* had taken a thrashing and **Hitler's** hopes of invading England were gone for ever. On 18 December one driver wrote home:

Just a few lines to let you know we are still here and I have just had a few days' leave.... Have been working hard since we got back, a trainload of benzine one day, 70 trucks of coal the next, and one day a valve-grind. We did not do much this morning; leave this afternoon and went into town to the pictures, 'The Frightened Lady'. Tea in town and home at 8.30. It is no fun in town in the blackout; you can't see anything or anyone on the street; so came back here....

But things were starting to move, and in the right direction. On 9 December Petrol Company had a detailed kit inspection (followed by a long list of fines for deficiencies) and a refit of all personnel. Christmas leave, in two parties each of 50 per cent company strength, was granted from 13 to 16 December and from the 17th to the 20th. On 30 December the Company was inspected by Brigadier [Hargest](#),¹⁵ Commanding Officer 2 NZEF ([UK](#)), and next day a baggage party comprising Second-Lieutenant Trewby and 12 other ranks left for Newport. By midnight on 2 January Petrol Company ([UK](#)), with a unit strength of 4 officers and 126 other ranks, had cleared their billets and entrained at [Farnborough](#).

January 3, 1941.

.... We are all packed up and just waiting for a move. Our stay in England is almost over, dear; a train journey last night, and we can see the seagulls now. We came on board at 11 a.m. and appear to be quite comfortable.

Their ship, the *Duchess of Bedford* (the 'Drunken Duchess'), officially HM Transport J24, left Newport at noon on 5 January and anchored off Barry. From there she sailed at 5 a.m. on 7 January with three other transports and a destroyer escort, favoured by mild weather and a calm sea. Near Belfast, after a halt of four days, they were joined by more large troop-carriers (the total now being 21) with an escort of one battleship, three cruisers, and twelve destroyers—a truly mighty convoy.

Conditions in HMT J24, though by no means luxurious, were better than those the Second Echelon shared while going to England in the *Aquitania*. The *Duchess* was smaller, and even more congested; but the Company's quarters were not so deep down. Its men occupied a space that had once been the children's nursery, under the dummy funnel. One driver recalls that the beer was 'crook'; and a sample bottle, taken to a ship's MO, gained the verdict: 'The horse this came from is dead. Throw it overboard'. Shortly afterwards (the driver relates) all beer aboard the *Duchess* was ditched.

February 22 (At sea).

.... We have been having a wonderful trip ... just sailing along on a calm sea all the time, with never one rough day, just like toy ships on a big pond.

We have had two stops, once for water and fuel, and once for stores, and had a few hours ashore at the second stop. I don't suppose we shall be ashore again until our journey ends.

It was not so bad crossing the Equator from the other side, but we are nearing it again now, and it is going to be a bit different this time. It is warming up nicely now, and we are not doing very much during the day—boat drill, a few lectures, and under the old showers about fill the bill. The worst part is going down to our messrooms for meals, the perspiration just drips off you. Our messroom is over the engine-room, we are told, and things are not so good; but the food is fairly good, and at present we are getting two bottles of mineral water with our meals—dinner and tea.

The stops made were at **Freetown** (25-29 January) and **Capetown** (8-12 February). As the convoy entered the former port an air alert sounded, and an unidentified bomber was fired at by warships and shore AA batteries. The aircraft made off smartly to the north without releasing any missiles. At Capetown general leave was granted on 8 February from two in the afternoon until midnight. For the next three

days there were route marches in the morning and leave in the afternoon from 1 p.m. to midnight. The conduct of personnel, notes the Company's war diary, was good. At 6.20 p.m. on 3 March the ships made **Port Tewfik**; and so, for the first time, the three echelons of the Second New Zealand Expeditionary Force found themselves in one and the same operational area. Also in that area was part of the **4th Reinforcements**, which had arrived at **Suez** in two sections—the first on 16 December, the other on 28 January.

March 9.

.... On land again. Travelled all night by train the first night and were only in that camp [**Maadi**] for 1 ½ days. Spent the next night on trucks and landed here [**Amiriya**] at 4 a.m. Were told: 'There's your bed, just where you stand!' So down we went for a couple of hours. Then joined up with the others and drew more clothes and gear and are now like walking clothes shops when we stagger off carrying all our kit. Certain we have 150 lb at present, though told there is some to be handed back. Meantime we carry it.

Petrol Company's **United Kingdom** draft joined the others at **Amiriya** on 8 March 1941. A week later they were still there, groping their way through a three-day sandstorm which put army cookhouses temporarily out of action. For the whole of that week the men had had their gear packed, ready to move. Each night they unpacked greatcoats and blankets (one per man) and bedded down in the sand again.

Then, at last, on 17 March, the Company embarked for its next great adventure—the campaign in **Greece**.

¹ **Dvr W. A. Mackinder**; born NZ 14 Feb 1900; motor mechanic; killed in action 21 May 1941.

² **Maj P. E. Coutts**, MBE, ED, m.i.d., born **Auckland**, 4 Dec 1903; salesman; OC I Amn Coy Oct 1941-Jan 1943, Feb-Oct 1945; 18 Tk Tpnr Coy Jan 1943-Mar 1944; Div Pet Coy Oct-Dec 1945;

killed in accident 20 Feb 1960.

³ Capt G. A. E. Hook; Hastings; born Marton, 10 Jan 1905; motor mechanic; p.w. 17 Jun 1941.

⁴ Maj F. Trewby, OBE, m.i.d.; London; born NZ 2 Jul 1907; traveller; wounded Apr 1941.

⁵ Capt E. A. Collins; Kerikeri; born Te Awamutu, 18 Jun 1913; motor salesman.

⁶ WO II C. E. James, EM and bar; Wellington; born Ashburton, 2 Jun 1903; linesman; wounded 26 May 1941; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

⁷ Maj C. E. Chetwin, m.i.d.; Trentham; born Napier, 14 Jul 1912; Regular soldier; p.w. 31 May 1941; OC MT Wkshps, RNZEME, Trentham, 1958-59.

⁸ S-Sgt C. R. Keating, EM; Wellington; born NZ 14 Jun 1907; canister maker.

⁹ Sgt V. H. M. Almao; Auckland; born Auckland, 31 Aug 1905; bus driver.

¹⁰ Sgt P. J. Keddell; Wellington; born NZ 13 Nov 1904; customs agent; wounded 25 May 1941; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

¹¹ Sgt L. A. Crawley; Tikokino; born NZ 18 Apr 1908; lorry driver, wounded Apr 1941.

¹² Lt C. T. Taaffe; Havelock North; born NZ 10 Jul 1917; fat-stock buyer; wounded 20 May 1941.

¹³ Maj K. A. Bailey, MM; Lower Hutt; born Wellington, 12 Aug 1912; car painter; joined Regular Force 1948; DADOS (2), Army

HQ, 1953-.

¹⁴ **Capt D. C. Ward**; born NZ 24 Apr 1905; motor driver; wounded May 1941.

¹⁵ **Brig J. Hargest**, CBE, DSO and bar, MC, m.i.d., MC (Gk); born Gore, 4 Sep 1891; farmer; Member of Parliament, 1931-44; Otago Mtd Rifles, 1914-20 (CO 2 Bn, Otago Regt); comd **5 Bde** May 1940-Nov 1941; p.w. 27 Nov 1941; escaped, **Italy**, Mar 1943; killed in action, **France**, 12 Aug 1944.

PETROL COMPANY

CHAPTER 6 – THE WAVELENGTH SHOW

CHAPTER 6

The Wavell Show

JUNE 1940 brought **Italy** into the war. That placed in jeopardy the meagre British forces then in North Africa. In his *Infantry Brigadier General Kippenberger* records: 'We were doing a night exercise when the singular code message for that event, "Prepare for burial", was brought in, and we went very happily back to camp. This was a stage nearer the real thing that we were becoming unreasonably impatient for. Each morning now we stood to an hour before dawn, waiting hopefully for Italian parachutists.'

One Petrol Company driver wrote in a letter home: 'Jim and I were enjoying a very good concert in the Recreation Tent when it was stopped and we were told about it. We gave three cheers and sang "God Save the King" and went back to camp. Thus a good concert was spoilt. Since then we have been working long hours.' Another group, playing poker in the **NAAFI** when the news broke, nonchalantly muttered 'So what?' and went on playing.

In advance of the event, **HQ 2 NZEF** had issued the following instructions to the four **NZASC** companies:

- (1) On receipt of the code word **F_{LIT}**, the full **PAD** scheme **Maadi Camp**, will be put into effect **AT ONCE**.
- (2) All posts (incl **AA LMG** posts) will be permanently manned and air sentries posted.
- (3) Eye shields and anti-gas ointment will be issued and the dispersion of tents and vehicles put in hand. Trench slits will then be dug.
- (4) All troops not already at shorter notice will be at 4 hrs notice to move.
- (5) As each successive step mentioned above is completed, it will be reported to this **HQ**.

On **10 June**, at 8.50 p.m., Petrol Company duly received the code word **FLIT** from Base Headquarters and acted on it. At 10.30 p.m. the same day the Company received the following signal from **HQ NZASC**: ' **HOLSTER** means all officers will carry revolvers and 12 rounds amn at all times.

This applies also to WO's in possession of revolvers'. Next day, at 8.30 a.m., the Company got from **Divisional Headquarters** the signal: 'FLIT and HOLSTER'. It immediately moved out to its dispersal area between the Marconi wireless station and the railway, alongside the 11th Hussars.

That day a detachment of twenty-six Petrol Company trucks, which had been sent on 7 June to 14 British Infantry Brigade at **Helwan** to form part of I Composite Section, NZASC, returned to the Company. This detachment comprised Lieutenant Hunter (OC), Sergeant **Hopley**,¹ Corporal **Smith**,² twenty-seven Petrol Company drivers and a cook, plus four other ranks from Supply Company. They had taken all equipment, including bedding, cooking and messing gear.

Thus re-concentrated Petrol Company spent 13 June digging first-aid posts and slit trenches. By 15 June the Company's war diary was again able to register 'Normal Routine'. The brief 'flap' was over. With it ended a period of tension in the **Mediterranean**; the general feeling was one of relief.

Precautionary measures continued. At Maadi the cinema, a concert company (the 'Blue Pencil' Revue) and the NAAFI's were closed down; a blackout was ordered throughout the camp; anti-aircraft posts were manned. On 18 June two infantry battalions moved out to the **Western Desert** to prepare defended position at **Garawla**, 12 miles south-east of Mersa **Matruh**. Their main task was the digging of a huge anti-tank ditch along the entire Wadi Naghamish (about 6000 yards) from its head to the sea. The sides of the wadi were scarped to a steep five-foot face, while in some places ditches 12 ft broad and 5 ft deep had to be dug.

On the day these troops marched out, a Petrol Company NCO, fretting at his unit's inactivity, wrote: 'We are all hoping for a move before long—RMT, Div Sup Col, 18 and 19 Bns have all moved out, in full in most cases, and we hear that Div Amn have gone too. But we are still stuck in **Maadi**.' They were not to be stuck for long. On 24 June, forty-two Petrol Company lorries were detached to 4 Brigade (assigned to the defence of Lines of Communication) and from then on convoy work

for our drivers became practically continuous. At last the Company was taking a hand in the war; and the term 'On Active Service', stamped at the top of their letters home, assumed a real meaning.

The war in North Africa opened lightly but briskly. Within twenty-four hours mobile British troops crossed the border into **Libya**, taking Italian outposts completely by surprise. They did not even know that war had been declared. On 14 June the 7th and 11th Hussars, with one company of the 60th Rifles, seized the frontier forts of **Capuzzo** and **Maddalena**, taking 220 prisoners. 'In this small but lively warfare', wrote Winston Churchill in Volume II of *The Second World War*, 'our troops felt they had the advantage, and soon conceived themselves to be masters of the desert.'

The most forward British defended positions then were at **Mersa Matruh**, with its railhead, its port, and its good road link to **Alexandria**. These received some attention from Italian bombers, but the effects were not impressive. The planes, with their motors cut off, would glide in out of the sun, release their bombs at 10,000 feet, then start up their engines and hare back over the border. Any loss of morale resulting from these tactics was certainly not on our side; and one New Zealand unit (**Divisional Cavalry**) notes in its war diary: 'The men were anxious to fire at anything, including our own planes, if necessary'. Nevertheless, the Division's first casualty from enemy action occurred in one such raid on 12 July, when an NCO of **4 RMT** Company was wounded.

At Matruh the C-in-C **Middle East** (General Sir Archibald Wavell) decided to await the attack of the main Italian hordes, which numbered about 80,000 concentrated near the Egyptian border, with a further 200,000 in bases and coastal depots between there and **Tripoli**. Against these, Wavell could muster the British **7 Armoured Division**, two-thirds of 4 Indian Division, one-third of the New Zealand Division, plus fourteen British battalions ungrouped in higher formations and two regiments of field artillery—altogether about 50,000 men.³ The British built a large prisoner-of-war pen at **Matruh** and waited.

But the expected onslaught did not come. The fearsome Italian dragon, despite its inflation by Axis propaganda, proved most reluctant. Its heads were pained and surprised to learn that they were expected to take the offensive. No such idea had ever occurred to them. *‘Alla possibilitàG di una offensiva’*, writes one Italian historian, *‘il Balbo non credeva’*. Marshal Balbo, then C-in-C, just did not believe in the feasibility of an offensive. ⁴

Mussolini, however, insisted. It would, he said, be a push-over. On 25 June the Germans were going to invade England; so no more troops, tanks, guns, or munitions, and above all no more aeroplanes, could ever again reach the British in North Africa. On the other hand, a flood of reinforcements would flow in to the Italians through their ports at Tripoli, Benghazi, Tobruk. Thus cajoled, Balbo wrote in a letter to Rome on 28 June: ‘At the right moment I shall fill in all the wells at Bardia [then his nearest stronghold to Egypt]—the last and only wells. I shall place myself at the head of my armies and march on Alexandria. Only there will our soldiers, if they wish to drink, find water!’

Even Italian historians rate this as melodramatic nonsense (*‘Garibaldinismo della peggiore specie’*); ⁵ and no doubt Balbo's troops—for whom he showed so much consideration—were relieved to hear that his plane was shot down and the Marshal killed (by Italian naval gunners) on the very day he wrote the letter. His successor, Graziani, was much more to their liking. He stalled successfully for several months, paying lip-service to the theory of an offensive, but demanding first a build-up in tanks, troops, and armoured cars. By September he was still jibbing, and assuring his masters in Rome and Berlin that ‘We move towards a defeat which, in the desert, must inevitably develop into a rapid and total disaster’. This was noted in the diary of Count Ciano, Mussolini's son-in-law, who also observes: ‘Never has a military operation been undertaken so much against the will of the commanders’.

But Mussolini would have no more of this. He ordered Graziani to attack or be fired, muttering darkly that one should only give jobs to

people who are looking for at least one promotion. Graziani's only anxiety was to remain a Marshal!

Such was the general picture. Into it fitted that part of the New Zealand Division—the First Echelon—then in the Middle East. The Second Echelon reached **Britain** six days after **Italy's** declaration of war; the Third was already mobilised and under training in New Zealand. Its fate hung in the balance. British policy, **General Freyberg** cabled from England, where he had gone to be with the Second Echelon, was favourable to concentrating the New Zealand Division in the **Middle East** as soon as possible. But it would be no service, the GOC advised, to send the Third Echelon out of the **Pacific** area unless it were immediately provided with arms and equipment sufficient to allow the troops to complete their training and take the field.

To send more troops to England without such provision, he pointed out, meant adding more mouths to a beleaguered and already hard-pressed country without adding to its military strength. It was even worse to do that in the Middle East, where, with **France** capitulated and disarmed, **Italy** was free to threaten Egypt. Better, he held, to send the Thirds to **Fiji**, where their presence, even if only temporary, would have some effect in the **Pacific**.

In the upshot, of course, the Third Echelon made Egypt on 29 September 1940, and was joined there five months later by the Seconds; thus **General Freyberg's** aim of a complete New Zealand Division, ready to fight as such, was finally realised. But both before and after that, the GOC had to battle hard to preserve the integrity of his force, and to prevent its dispersal 'in penny packets' at the behest of some higher command.

Meanwhile the First Echelon, and especially the ASC, found plenty of work. While 4 Brigade went on with its defence preparations at **Garawla**, Supply and Petrol Companies, their vehicles smeared with oil and sand for camouflage, shuttled the battalions to and from the **Western Desert**, in temperatures ranging to 115 degrees in the shade and

sometimes remaining over the 100 mark until after 8 p.m. Drivers became affected with heat exhaustion and cramp due to loss of salt from their bodies—a condition which the authorities sought to remedy by publishing in routine orders a recipe for a drink containing half-an-ounce of table salt to a gallon of water flavoured with lemon or lime juice.

The trouble later on was to find the gallon of water; meanwhile Petrol Company's OC produced his own special answer to the thirst question. From 20 to 28 July the Company was engaged on secret night operations (detailed further on) in the desert near E1 Alamein. Petrol Company then moved to **El Daba**, where it camped between the railway station ('two huts and a roll of wire') and the sea. With exemplary concern for the welfare of his troops, Major Dickson decided to replenish their body moisture with beer—asserting that in World War I he himself had proved ale to be an antidote for Gippo tummy.

Stoically, the men resolved to take this treatment; so Captain McDonagh was despatched with careful instructions and a 3-ton truck to the Stella breweries at Alex. Supplies reached Petrol Company lines the same day and were placed in charge of the Company's canteen. All hands were entitled to purchase one bottle daily either just before or just after the evening meal.

Previously, orders had been issued by 4 Brigade Headquarters that no vehicles were to travel eastward past the road-barrier at **El Daba** without permission from Brigade Headquarters—a formality which Major Dickson (preoccupied as he was with the health of his men) had somehow overlooked. But Brigade HQ did not overlook it; and the OC was invited, in Brigadier Puttick's most characteristic manner, to explain just what he meant by this unauthorised act.

Major Dickson pointed to Petrol Company's low incidence of illness—the lowest, he claimed, in the **Western Desert**—and he repeated his contention that beer would maintain this creditable record. So attractive were these arguments that his transgression was forgiven; and thereafter

most units in the **Western Desert**, including those of 4 Brigade, sent their beer-wagons regularly to Alex.

From 20 to 28 July Petrol Company joined a composite group comprising the operating sections, a breakdown lorry from Workshops, a detachment of Divisional Supply, and a platoon of infantry. Under command of Major **Maxwell**,⁶ of HQ **2 NZEF**, this 'Maxforce', as it was called, had Major Dickson as column commander. Its task was to establish secret underground dumps of food, fuel, and other warlike stores at a point 23 miles in the desert roughly south from the **Alamein** station, close to the **Qattara Depression**, and almost on the **Fuka- Cairo** track.

The column camped at **Burg el Arab**. While the men got busy digging slit trenches, establishing cookhouses and planting 'desert lilies', Majors Maxwell and Dickson reconnoitred the terrain and took compass bearings. Then, far out in the desert, they drove a peg. This was to be the objective for their nightly convoys, travelling by compass in total blackout. They themselves would take turns at leading the columns.

With Trevor **Sims**⁷ driving, Major Dickson led the first expedition. During the day the men had loaded their trucks at **Burg el Arab** station and received their instructions. They were to cross the railway after dark at **El Alamein** and proceed in convoy to their destination. There, infantry details travelling with the convoy would dig pits and bury the caches. The column had to complete its job and be on the **Matruh-Alexandria** road, clear of the **Alamein** area, by daylight.

Leading off into the 'blue' on that first night, the OC stood up in his car with head poked through the open sun-top, taking a bearing. He noted a constellation dead in line and thereafter steered by that—to the consternation of Sims, whose choice now lay between charging down such obstacles as boulders, thickets and wadis, or incurring the OC's wrath for driving off course. By such methods they led that first convoy to within feet of the marking peg; and on successive nights vehicles had simply to follow the tracks thus made for them in the sand.

Nevertheless, this proved a nerve-racking assignment for drivers unaccustomed to blackout operation in the desert; and on the night of 21-22 July several trucks piled up, causing damage to three vehicles and half-a-dozen men. Two of the load-carriers were repaired in the field; the other was towed back to **Maadi** by the Company's breakdown unit. Petrol Company's Alec **Ness** ⁸ and five Supply Column drivers were evacuated to hospital. ⁹

In a report on this incident Staff-Sergeant Barnett noted that the mishap was caused by darkness, dust and bad visibility. He did not consider the drivers were negligent. Column distance, he observed, was 50 yards, in bad going with no lights allowed. He recommended to OC Petrol Company (for transmission to Commander NZASC) ¹⁰ that for night driving in future a coloured light be attached to the rear member of each truck chassis for the following driver to use as a guide. This light would not be visible from the air. He also recommended that all vehicles operating in the desert be equipped with sand trays or steel netting tracks. All these measures were adopted as desert warfare progressed.

New Zealanders were not the only ones with truck troubles at that time. The frequency of mishaps in which vehicles driven by British troops were involved resulted in a warning in routine orders that disciplinary action would be taken if the driver of the vehicle was at fault. During June and July there were 129 cases involving death or serious injury in the **Cairo** sub-area alone. It was of the highest importance, the order stated, that personnel and vehicles should not be out of action through avoidable injury, and that a better impression should prevail of the degree of driving skill of British troops.

Egyptian Army and Cypriot drivers were much on the roads then, and a more slap-happy lot it would be hard to imagine. Their antics in the **Western Desert** (they were withdrawn when hostilities really began) spread alarm and despondency among our troops and must have caused theirs some grave supply shortages due to the non-arrival of vehicles, or

their arrival with only a remnant of their original load, the rest having bounced off in transit. Their lorries, wrecked and abandoned along the desert road, provided a useful source of 'spares' for the Company's Workshops Section.

One such vehicle was spotted by Captain McDonagh during the Maxforce business, on the road between **Baggush** and the Divisional Petrol Company's camp. That night a workshops truck visited the scene and removed the Gippo's engine. It was duly delivered to Workshops HQ, where Captain McDonagh was annoyed to learn that someone had got in first and taken the generator. The sequel came a few evenings later, when officers from a Divisional Ammunition detachment, camped nearby, foregathered with their Petrol Company cronies for a drink.

Ammo's Bob **Aitken** ¹¹ told a sad tale of how a few nights back he had spotted an abandoned truck and removed its generator, deciding to return later on for the engine. But he found when he went back that 'some thieving B— had stolen it'. When told the identity of the 'thieving B—' he generously forgave him and donated the Gippo's generator to Petrol Company.

About this time Harry Barnett found a beautiful Ford station wagon, brand new, left unattended a few miles up the road. A Petrol Company Workshops party soon had the vehicle towed behind some sandhills, for attention later, under cover of darkness. They prayed for a wind, which would restrict visibility and leave their prize undiscovered. But instead of a wind, an Egyptian recovery vehicle arrived and whisked the broken-down wagon away.

Soon, however, authority put a stop to all that, and routine orders announced that 'the removal of any equipment from abandoned vehicles, or any form of pilfering whatsoever, must cease, otherwise disciplinary action will be taken against offenders'.

After the Maxforce project Petrol Company returned to **Maadi**, where its headquarters remained throughout August. On Sunday, 8 September,

they moved 'up the blue' again, following the now familiar route via **Cairo, Mena**, the Halfway House at **Wadi Natrun**; then on to **Amiriya** and the Western Desert road, with its signposts pointing helpfully to such places as **Tobruck, Tobrouk, and Tobruk**. One could always get a beer—or at least a mug of 'chai'—at the Halfway House **NAAFI**; and it was a poor convoy commander who couldn't work out his schedule of halts to include one there.

After a brief sojourn at **Ikingi Maryut**, 123 of the Company's **Middle East** personnel (which now numbered 169) made camp, on 18 September, at **El Daba**. Those left behind were Second-Lieutenant McCook with 33 other ranks to form a Composite Company with Supply Column men at **Maadi**, a few in hospital, and five attached to 2/2 MAC. ¹²

'Our main occupation for some time', wrote one Petrol Company NCO, 'was dig, dig, dig. Getting the chaps to sink their funkholes down to sufficient depth was quite a job, until the bombing raids started. After that there was no trouble, and picks and shovels could be heard going at all sorts of odd hours of the day and night.' Mess and orderly-room tents were sandbagged and dug in—so well, in fact, that one wag suggested dropping supplies in by parachute!

But enemy air activity then was more of a diversion than a threat to life, even though the Italians had begun—on 13 September—their long-awaited advance. With six infantry divisions and eight tank battalions they surged across the border. Their objective? Not the conquest of Egypt, which would give them **Alexandria, Cairo** and the **Suez Canal**—strategic prizes of inestimable value. No; their modest target was **Sidi Barrani**, a tiny outpost not far from the frontier and a hundred miles short of the British positions at **Mersa Matruh**. There Graziani halted and began to build a ring of forts, the immediate purpose still being defensive, but with the possibility that this zone would be used later on as the springboard for an all-out attack upon Egypt.

New Zealand combatant troops occupied the **Baggush Box**,



C Section men in Tobruk, 2 December 1941

C Section men in Tobruk, 2 December 1941

Cookhouse at Fuka, Christmas Day, 1941



Cookhouse at Fuka, Christmas Day, 1941



General Freyberg's caravan made by 13 Section, Workshops

General Freyberg's caravan made by 13 Section, Workshops

'Hori' Perston breaks away in a rugby match at Fayid,
February 1942



'Hori' Perston breaks away in a rugby match at Fayid, February 1942



Petrol Company on the way to Syria, March 1942

Petrol Company on the way to Syria, March 1942

Workshops' cook truck stuck fast in soft sand in the Sinai Desert



Workshops' cook truck stuck fast in soft sand in the Sinai Desert



Syria: the upper reaches of the Orontes River

Syria: the upper reaches of the Orontes River



Water seller

Water seller



GREECE

a defence sector bounded on the north by the **Mediterranean**, to the south by the escarpment—a steep-faced plateau of lime- stone

rising in places to some 500 feet. This 'box' lay some miles to the rear of **Matruh** (then the British front) and about 140 miles from **Sollum**, on the Libyan border. Stretching inland from **Sollum** to **Siwa** was 'the Wire', a barbed entanglement erected by the Italians in 1932. Without demolition this barrier could be crossed at only four places, all of which were closely guarded by the Italians.

From the **Daba** railway station—about 110 miles from **Alexandria** and some 90 miles from **Matruh**—vast quantities of materials had to be carted, to New Zealand troops in the **Baggush Box** and to the Tommies and Indians farther up. So Petrol Company joined **Freyberg's** 'Colonial Carrying Company' and bunged in. One trip took them to **Maadi**, for a load of gift parcels from New Zealand. But mostly they carried 'general' cargoes—RE stores, ammunition, petrol, foodstuffs— and sometimes troops, up the 'blue'.

By then Italian planes were becoming rather a nuisance over **Matruh**, and orders decreed that when a red flag (air-raid warning) was hoisted above the fortress all traffic must stop and personnel take cover in dugouts and slit trenches. Petrol Company drivers were quick to note that the smartest at obeying this instruction were the Egyptians who ran the Mersa NAAFI. So, an unattended **NAAFI** being the answer to an army driver's dream, a system was soon worked out to take advantage of these temporary absences.

Petrol Company spent two and a half months at **Daba**, and the period passed quite happily. Set times were allotted for work, for vehicle maintenance, and for recreation. With the sea only three miles away, and the season being autumn, bathing was popular for a while. Then interest switched to soccer, since the ground was too hard for rugby. Supplies of beer were adequate, and in the lengthening evenings our men found comfort in that, and in the resultant song.

There was, however, one notable drawback—the flies. ‘All day and every day’, wrote one Petrol Company diarist, ‘they swarm around from daylight to dark and plague our lives out. At mealtimes they are unbearable, and when one tries to sit down in peace to write or read they delight in pestering one. They get up your nose and in your mouth, and even sit on the nib of the pen. We swat and swat and must have killed millions, but there are billions still left behind.’ Nor were flies the only menace, for the account continues: ‘Bill Davis woke at 3 a.m. yesterday with a 15 inch snake in his bed. We questioned what sort of a snake it was—pink, blue, or spotted. But Bill produced the evidence all right, and skinned it and made a good book-mark out of it.’

On 28 September Captain Ramsden set out with a small Petrol Company convoy taking rations and mail for C Company of I Battalion, King's Royal Rifle Corps, then camped at **Siwa**. With him went ten other ranks, one Humber staff car, three 3-ton Bedfords, one 30-cwt Bedford, one Bren gun and one Lewis gun. The party left camp at 7.55 a.m. with five days' rations and 164 gallons of reserve petrol.

Next day, at 5 p.m., they made **Siwa**, fulfilling various assignments there and en route. On 30 September they rested, bathing—perhaps wistfully—in Cleopatra's Pool, and enjoying the pleasant greenness of the surroundings. On the way back they tried to give a lift to some **Senussi** refugees. At that time many desert families, accustomed to driving their herds to and fro across the border, were threatened with starvation when hostilities closed the frontier; British convoys had orders to help them whenever possible. This group, however, proved suspicious, and language difficulties made explanations awkward, so they went their own way.

The convoy returned to Petrol Company Headquarters on 2 October, having travelled 560 miles. Its only mishap was one broken spring-leaf.

By now General Wavell's plan for attacking the Italians was building up. The enemy's stalling had played into Wavell's hands, allowing

reinforcements from **Britain**—including a much-needed armoured brigade—to make the three-month journey round South Africa. At Helwan 6 Australian Division had arrived; New Zealand's Third Echelon was at **Maadi**.

In the desert, troops were being moved up by stealth, and on 9 October Lieutenant Davis, with a convoy of twenty-one 3-ton lorries and four 30-cwts, took a battalion of 4 Indian Division from **Baggush** to a secret destination by night. This mission succeeded after a series of misadventures in which Davis, through stopping to help some Indian drivers held up by soft sand, lost touch with the convoy, was bailed up by an Egyptian sentry armed with a loaded rifle, and 'pranged' his car on a tar-drum.

Lieutenant Hunter also had his worries while on an expedition to **Maadi** that month to uplift base kits for distribution to New Zealand units in the **Western Desert**. This was to let the men get their winter clothing, underclothes, and woollen scarves and gloves. At the same time serge uniforms and spare boots were withdrawn and returned to Ordnance.

First shock to the lieutenant's system came when one of his drivers was arrested at **Maadi**. That was on the night of Sunday, 27 October. Next morning at 4 a.m., as the convoy was lined up ready to leave for the Desert again, he found that another driver was AWOL; so the party had to proceed without him.

'Whilst travelling through the suburb of **Maadi**', Hunter reported, 'I was informed by air-raid wardens that a raid was in progress. I therefore gave instructions for the convoy to proceed without lights and at a reduced speed. Due to this, truck No. L 200941 driven by No. 6006, Dvr Neill, N. M., collided with a native donkey cart. Whilst halted for the morning meal on the **Cairo- Alexandria** Road at 0700, hours on 28 Oct 40, I was approached by No. 4335, Dvr Mace, H. F., ¹⁴ who informed me that he was a stowaway and wished to return to his unit [Petrol Company—in the **Western Desert**; Mace had been left behind with the

Composite Company in **Maadi**]. I had no option but to bring him into the W.D. He was returned to **Maadi** on Wednesday, 30 Oct 40.'

Air-raid alarms in **Cairo** and **Maadi** were frequent during this period, but no bombs fell until 20 October. On that night a single Italian plane unloaded thirteen 'eggs', some of which exploded near El Abadri, a native village close to **Maadi Camp**. One native was killed and six injured. Egyptian ack-ack provided extra hazards by showering the area with flak and nose-caps.

This was also the era of the 'Thermos bomb', so-called from its likeness in size and shape to an ordinary thermos flask. Italian aircraft scattered these gadgets broadcast in the Western Desert; the impact on landing served to prime them ready for detonation at the slightest touch. So thickly were they sown at one stage that the movement of vehicles by night was curtailed to 'strictly necessary purposes'. Methods of dealing with the thermos bomb, however, were soon found—they could be detonated by small-arms fire or by wires dragged behind Bren carriers—so this weapon's effectiveness was quickly cancelled. Petrol Company suffered no casualties from it, though two men were injured by Italian hand grenades.

Troops back in **Maadi** were treated, on 25 October, to yet another ceremonial parade, this time in honour of **Britain's** Secretary of State for War, the Rt. Hon. Anthony Eden, accompanied by General Wavell, Lieutenant-General Wilson and **Major-General Freyberg**. During the preceding few days Mr Eden had visited troops of the First Echelon at Maaten **Baggush** and other points in the **Western Desert**. After the review at **Maadi** he conveyed to the men, in a Special Order of the Day, the appreciation of the British Government of the part being played by New Zealanders in the Empire's cause.

'I welcomed your First Contingent when they arrived in Egypt', said this message. 'I have just seen them fighting fit in the **Western Desert**; I saw the Second Contingent in England waiting for **Hitler's** invasion. Today I have seen the Third Contingent, and I cannot tell you how

impressed I am by the wonderful physique and bearing of the New Zealand troops.' He wished them good luck and Godspeed.

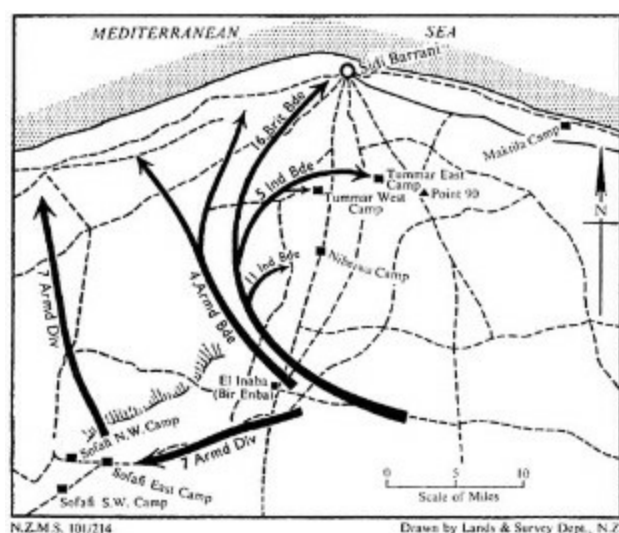
November 1940 brought the Petrol Company its first real taste of desert winter. Temperatures dropped, and the nights became very cold. Icy winds pierced the thickest clothing. On the first of the month A Section's sergeant noted in his diary: 'Here I am with the **19 Bn** in a howling dust-storm. My vehicles are scattered to hell, five with the **Wellington-West Coast Coy**, five with the Taranakis, and two, plus the AA, with HQ. Fortunately I have good reliable drivers in most cases, and have left good men i/c of each group (**Bickers** ¹⁵ with the WWC and Stubbs with TARA, keeping **Gilmore** with me) so things should be O.K. Have just been over to see how they were doing, but all have gone into the desert on manoeuvres and won't be back until 0030 hours tomorrow.'

Next day he wrote: 'The worst night I have heard yet in Egypt. I write "heard" because I wasn't out in it but was tucked up in my blankets by 1830 hours and just lay there and listened to the wind piping outside and to intermittent spells of heavy rain. Real rain! ! ! I was feeling very sorry for my chaps with TARA and WWC out in the blue all night, but on inspecting them this morning after they had returned they were all O.K. and had had no trouble in the Desert, thank goodness. Wind and sand is still flying everywhere this morning, making things far from pleasant. All hands here, including Sgts, mess in the open regardless of weather, so one gets used to the taste of sand.'

That month Lieutenant Hunter left Pètrol Company to replace Second-Lieutenant McCook, ex-Composite Company, at **Maadi**; and on 16 December 'J.J.' was marched out attached to **4 RMT** Company. Thus Petrol Company lost a popular and efficient officer. December also saw the departure of Charles Graham—first to HQ NZASC, then to OCTU. To OCTU likewise went Ian Macphail (11 November) and **Corporal Gilmore** (27 December). In November Major Dickson was marched out to hospital with a fractured rib, attributed officially to a stumble in the dark down the orderly-room steps, but by rumour to scrum-practice in the officers'

mess.

In December 1940 the war in the desert began to hot up; and Petrol Company took a hand in it. On the 4th ¹⁶ the Company moved to **Qasaba**, and from then on its drivers worked flat out carting petrol, rations, blankets, firewood—and troops. On the 7th it was announced at a conference of officers that the Western Desert Force, of which the Company was part, would ‘carry out a reconnaissance in force, with the object of testing the strength of the Italian defences around **Sidi Barrani**.’



FIRST LIBYAN CAMPAIGN OPENS, 9-11 DECEMBER 1940

FIRST LIBYAN CAMPAIGN OPENS, 9-11 DECEMBER 1940

Those defences then consisted of a loosely knit arc of camps stretching from **Sidi Barrani** on the sea coast to Safai deep in the desert. Between these two lay the strongholds of Tummar East, **Tummar West**, **Nibeis** and Rabia. There was also an outpost at **Maktila**, midway between **Mersa Matruh** and **Sidi Barrani**.

This ‘reconnaissance in force’ was, of course, the real thing—the opening gambit in a complicated plan of attack. Few officers knew the full details, for the success of the plan depended on surprise.

At dawn on 9 December a detachment of 7 Armoured Division attacked **Nibeis**. At the same time Indian troops, ‘planted’ in the desert

by New Zealand transport the night before, went in with the bayonet—closely followed (no show without Punch!) by NCOs and drivers of the NZASC, thirsting for Italian blood. So successful was this action that in less than two hours the stronghold had fallen, thirty tanks were captured, and an Italian general (Maletti) killed. Into the bag went his second-in-command and fifty other officers, along with great masses of men and materials.

Tummar West and **Tummar East** fell in quick succession and by nightfall practically the whole of the area and most of its defenders were in our hands. While this was being accomplished armoured formations had worked round to the west of **Sidi Barrani**, blocking the garrison's escape. Next day the **Coldstream Guards** thrust westward from **Mersa Matruh** in a frontal attack on **Sidi Barrani**, supported by a heavy naval bombardment. That night the Guards reported having taken more prisoners than they could count; they had, they said, 'about five acres of officers and 200 acres of other ranks'.

Throughout this action Lieutenant A. L. Lomas, **NZMC**, medical officer with **4 RMT** Company, worked among the wounded in the open under heavy fire from artillery and machine guns. On 10 December he carried on from 1.30 p.m. to 3 a.m. next day without food or rest—an inspiring example of devotion to duty. For this he was awarded the **Military Cross**, one of the first to be gained in the New Zealand Division during this war. Jack **Prichard**,¹⁷ Lomas's medical orderly, who also went overseas with **Petrol Company's** first echelon, won the **Military Medal** for similar stout work.

Now the hunt was on. Westward over the border the victors chased and harried their demoralised foe, inflicting heavy casualties. In London Prime Minister Churchill announced to an electrified House of Commons, and a world still incredulous of British victory: 'We do not know yet how many Italians were caught in the encirclement, but it would not be surprising if at least the best part of three Italian divisions, including numerous **Blackshirt** formations, have been either destroyed or captured.'

‘The pursuit to the westward continues with the greatest vigour. The Air Force are now bombing, the Navy shelling, the principal road open to the retreating enemy; and considerable additional captures have already been reported. While it is still too soon to measure the scale of these operations, it is clear that they constitute a victory which, in this African theatre of war, is of the first order.’

Petrol Company joined in the pursuit, all hands working non-stop to supply the fighting troops with food, munitions, petrol; rum, tobacco and mail. Their backloads were prisoners of war and salvage. They travelled now to Barrani, Sollum, Fort Capuzzo, Bardia. Convoys led by Lieutenant Davis and Second-Lieutenant McCook moved 17 Australian Infantry Brigade from Sidi Haneish to Sollum—the same Aussies whom Petrol Company moved up for the attack on Bardia, and who soon were to storm the Tobruk fortress, singing ‘Waltzing Matilda’ and ‘The Wizard of Oz’.

The Bardia job followed closely on our Company's first Christmas overseas—a period marked by villainous sandstorms which continued off and on until the end of the month. Most of the Company's ‘Western Desert Branch’ managed to assemble for Christmas dinner, which commenced at 4.30 p.m., with the NCOs serving. Sergeant McNae¹⁸ and his helpers turned on a great spread: goose, beef, vegetables, plum-pudding, fruit salad, oranges, nuts, and two bottles of Aussie beer per man, ‘buckshee’.¹⁹ By half past five next morning every available Petrol Company driver had been called out and was on the job again in pitch darkness. Thereafter they drove for three solid days with scarcely a stop.

They returned to camp between 6 p.m. and midnight on 28 December and were ordered to be out again by 7 a.m. next day; so off they went for another three days—tired, unshaven, grubby, but still cheerful, and anxious not to miss a minute of this, their first real ‘show’. By 31 December they were back in camp again, without mishap, and busily drinking the Old Year out and the New Year in. From 5 December to 1 January the Company's desert detachment had travelled

83,685 miles. One of their stock runs, from the DID ²⁰ at **Matruh** to No. 9 FSD ²¹ across the border, was 218 miles each way. Mileage per vehicle, inclusive of all types, averaged 1819 for the period. Fuel consumption totalled 9835 gallons of petrol—roughly 8.5 miles to the gallon—and 109 gallons of oil

The three-tonners, of course, ran up most of this mileage, their percentage of the total being 62.8. Rough going—over the notorious **Halfaya Pass**—caused much damage to springs and radiators; but sterling work by a depleted Workshops sub-section kept the transport moving. No vehicles were laid up, and all demands on transport were met. Drivers often crossed miles of featureless desert alone, without map or compass, and with only scant directions. ²² Yet they never failed to deliver their loads, sometimes thanks to makeshift running repairs requiring much ingenuity. This was the Company's first battle role, and all played their part with great credit.

Not all were angelic, of course. There was, for example, that deplorable business of the keg of Chianti, captured in battle (or thereabouts) by **Tim Collins** ²³ and his mates. Suspecting the existence of some such threat to good order and military discipline, Captain Ramsden, who was OC at the time, often sallied forth to seek out and destroy. But his searches of truck and bivvy yielded not one drop. He was forced to admit defeat—until one night, by chance, he saw the miscreants returning from the desert, pleasantly aglow. He was then able to follow their footprints and discover the cache—well planted, as they thought, among the sand-dunes.

On 8 January our men were forbidden while on duty to wear dress 'of a pattern not issued by NZ Div'. But that did not deter them from picking up new uniforms from captured Italian dumps, and appearing rigged out like Ruritanian firemen. Italian dugouts, on account of their 'livestock', were also banned, while drivers were forbidden to sleep in caves (many of which still remained from Roman times) because they too were mostly infested with ticks and lice.

Carting Italian prisoners also had its moments, as, for example, when one Tommy sergeant, supervising the loading, gave each man a kick in the pants to help him aboard. Our drivers had instructions not to stop while carrying these cargoes, the result being a nice old mess in the trucks and no small pressure on the drivers' bladders. But soon our men used common sense and ignored this order.

A Petrol Company officer was once escorting a truckload of prisoners which got itself stuck in a patch of loose sand. He and his driver hopped out of their vehicle and began to shove the three-tonner—encouraged and applauded by the passengers. But a little of that was more than enough and those near the back of the truck were ordered to get down and lend a hand.

‘No! No! No!’ they protested. ‘Siamo uffizi!’ (‘We are officers’)—an argument which drew a suitably garnished reply.

On 6 January Jim Greig, again acting CSM, was concerned in an incident with PWs. ‘We proceeded through Sollum,’ he reported, ‘which is just a mass of ruins, and on to Fort Capuzzo where we loaded prisoners for Matruh. Left the Fort at 1000 hrs and reached just short of Barrani about 1300 hrs. Stopped for lunch but had no rations for the prisoners, who seemed to be fairly hungry. Unfortunately I had (entirely unawares) stopped near the prisoners’ former area, which they had only recently vacated, and several of them made a dash for it.

‘I yelled at them to stop and the nearest ones did so; but others who did not hear me kept running, so for the first time I used my revolver on Active Service and blazed a few rounds in the air after the runaways. That certainly stopped them, so I searched them all and apparently all the poor blighters had gone for were biscuits which they knew were in the dugouts. One or two were disinclined to go back to the trucks but a couple of revolver shots settled their doubts for them! ! !’

On 1 January 1941 Staff-Sergeant Barnett marched out to OCTU, followed by Corporal May on the 22nd and Sergeant Lyon²⁴ a month

later. On 2 February Petrol Company established a 'Feeding Point' at **Buq Buq**, with Bill Ambrose in charge, to provide hot meals for convoys operating between **Matruh** and **Sollum**. This allowed drivers to attend to maintenance on their vehicles while the cooks were preparing a meal.

Following the dissolution of the NZASC Composite Company, Headquarters and other elements of Petrol Company made camp at **Helwan**. There a routine order of 6 February laid it down that any of the following items of captured Italian equipment held by Divisional Petrol Company personnel were to be returned immediately to the QM store: rifles, pistols, anti-tank guns, mortars, artillery, ammunition of any type, motor-cycles, motor vehicles. If this order aimed at preventing such trifles from being sent home in letters and parcels it was not entirely successful, for one driver claims to have forwarded to his wife, piecemeal, an enemy field-gun and a good supply of ammunition. What use she made of these small tokens is not disclosed.

Some three weeks later another RO forbade the inclusion, in letters and parcels, of animals, birds, reptiles, insects (including the eggs of insects) in their larval, pupal and adult stages, spiders, scorpions, and the eggs of spiders and scorpions. So much for the aspirations of our khaki-clad naturalists— though it is on record that one man *did* send home a snake (wrapped in newspaper) which ripened en route and rotted all the mail in the bag.

On 19 February 1941 the **Buq Buq** 'Rest House' closed. Next day the desert detachment struck camp at **El Daba** and moved back to **Helwan**. A fortnight later Petrol Company (**Middle East**), which now included a small Third Echelon party, transferred to the British transit camp at **Amiriya**. There, on 8 March, they were joined by their Second Echelon associates, newly arrived from England. And so, at last, the Company was complete.

¹ **Sgt H. R. Hopley**; born **Morrinsville**, 17 Apr 1910; public servant; killed in action 21 May 1941.

² **Cpl P. E. Smith; Wellington; born NZ 30 Jan 1909; taxi driver; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.**

³ **Churchill, op. cit., p. 370.**

⁴ **General Pietro Maravigna, *Come Abbiamo Perduto La Guerra In Africa*, p. 199.**

⁵ **Op. cit., p. 200.**

⁶ **Brig D. T. Maxwell, OBE, m.i.d.; Wellington, born NZ 13 Jun 1898; Regular soldier; AA & QMG 2 NZ Div Oct 1941-Jun 1942; Commander, British Commonwealth Sub-Area, Tokyo, 1946–47; Commander, Central Military District, 1952–53.**

⁷ **Sgt T. H. Sims, m.i.d.; Petone; born Hawera, 16 Jan 1911; plate maker; wounded 2 Jun 1944.**

⁸ **Sgt A. Ness; Dunedin; born NZ 10 Jan 1916; mercer's assistant.**

⁹ **A few weeks later—on 28 Aug 1940—Petrol Company suffered its first fatality, Dvr M. C. Talbot being accidentally killed while on convoy work in the Western Desert.**

¹⁰ **Colonel Crump.**

¹¹ **Maj R. C. Aitken; born England, 6 Jul 1894; mechanic.**

¹² **Motor Ambulance Convoy.**

¹³ **On 27 September Cpl Gilmore, while riding a motor-cycle from Ikingi Maryut to Baggush before dawn, crashed into a boulder and broke some ribs. He was admitted to an Australian field ambulance.**

14 Dvr H. F. Mace; Christchurch; born NZ 7 Jul 1912; printer; p.w. 1 Jun 1941; escaped Jun 1941; recaptured Sep 1941.

15 Sgt R. J. Bickers; Porangahau; born NZ 29 Jan 1906; fisherman.

16 On 5 December Cpl Gilmore marched out, with three trucks, for attachment to 7 Armoured Division. Their role was to carry wooden bridging to enable our armour to negotiate tank traps during the advance. The officer who commanded the party during their attachment reported that the work had been carried out in an extremely business-like manner, and that the driving was of a particularly high standard. For this and other sterling work in the Western Desert, Gilmore gained the BEM.

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

18 Sgt K. M. McNae; Midhurst, Taranaki; born NZ 28 Sep 1916; service driver; wounded and p.w. 21 May 1941.

19 The following conversation is reported, between Dvr 'Jock' Niven and a Petrol Company cobbler:

Jock: 'Are ye no' taking your beer, mon?'

Cobbler: 'No. Never touch the stuff.'

Jock (aghast): 'But mon, it's free! It's free!'

20 Detail Issue Depot.

21 Field Supply Depot.

22 Cpl L. Stubbs recalls that he was once instructed to take four trucks with meat, vegetables, bread, etc., to General Wavell's headquarters. He was given a map reference and a set of compass bearings. But when he asked for a compass, none was available. The detachment reached its destination and returned safely,

after several days.

²³ Dvr S. M. Collins; Wellington; born NZ 20 Aug 1906; driver.

²⁴ Capt G. W. Lyon, m.i.d.; born NZ 16 Jan 1915; clerk.

PETROL COMPANY

CHAPTER 7 – CAMPAIGN IN GREECE

CHAPTER 7

Campaign in Greece

IN Greece Petrol Company first met that pattern of death, destruction and defeat so often to be repeated before final victory. There the Division fought its first campaign, with Army Service Corps units functioning according to the book— or trying to. This campaign, like the one in **Crete, has aroused much controversy, and armchair strategists, mightier with the pen than with the sword, have raked it well over.**

But because the driver in his truck, like the infanteer in his slit trench, has little chance of gathering in the broad issues involved, these will be sketched briefly as we go along, to let him know just what was at stake as he hurtled over the glorified cart tracks of **Greece or cursed the strafings of the *Luftwaffe*.**

By February 1941, General O'Connor's victories in North **Africa had destroyed ten Italian divisions, captured 130,000 prisoners, 400 tanks and 1290 guns. His army had advanced 600 miles at a cost of fewer than 3000 casualties. The Greek adventure robbed these successes of what seemed to be their logical fruition—a drive to **Tripoli**, the securing of air bases in North Africa, and the restoration of British control over the Central Mediterranean.**

Our GOG had no illusions about how tough the Greek campaign was going to be. He made that plain when bidding farewell to General Wavell in Egypt on 5 March, and also in a Special Order of the Day which was read to all troops after they had sailed.

‘It was a solemn thought’, **General Freyberg records, ‘to be the Advance Guard of a British Army in the **Balkans**, especially against an enemy like the Germans, fully equipped and outnumbering us by three or four to one. It is true that they had no easy lines of communications; but difficult though these were they were quicker than our seaborne system of supplies. I wondered who had given the order for us to come. I**

should not have liked to make the decision.'

Italy had attacked **Greece** on 28 October 1940. Against their more numerous and better-armed foe the Greeks fought well, quickly seizing the initiative, and threatening to hurl the Italians back through **Albania** into the sea. So, after anxious consultations between **Hitler** and **Mussolini**, in February 1941 German armies began to assemble in **Bulgaria**, where they became a menace not only to the flank of the Greek Army fighting in **Albania**, but also to **Yugoslavia** and **Turkey**.

This threat of a strong German thrust down the **Balkan** Peninsula to the shores of the Eastern Mediterranean, and perhaps through **Turkey** and **Syria** (then held by Vichy France) to the **Suez** Canal, was far too dangerous to ignore. With the Greeks holding the Italians, **Yugoslavia** coming in (it was hoped) on our side, and **Turkey** at least remaining neutral, there seemed an odds-on chance that a British Expeditionary Force to **Greece** could serve a useful purpose. It would stiffen **Balkan** resistance to the Axis. It would most certainly make the Germans fight for what they wanted, and it might have far-reaching effects on the attitude of **Russia** and **America**. Besides, underlying the whole problem was the moral issue. Not only was **Britain** anxious to honour her treaty pledges to **Greece**, her only remaining ally on the Continent, but failure to do so might have thrown the few states still neutral into the Axis fold.

That New Zealand troops were chosen to be the advanced guard of this expedition was an honour indeed—though one of which even our GOC was unaware when he issued orders on Christmas Day 1940 for 4 Infantry Brigade (then in the **Western Desert**) to concentrate with the rest of the Division at **Helwan**. At that time, as we have seen, the Second Echelon had already begun to move from the **United Kingdom** to the Middle East. Not until 17 February 1941 was **Freyberg** apprised of the New Zealand Division's vital role; and so, with fully one-third of his force still on the high seas, it took planning of a high order to channel all the various units and their equipment swiftly to the embarkation point.

Secrecy was essential. And Petrol Company, groping around with the others in the murk of a three-day khamseen at **Amiriya**, could only guess from their issue of tropical kit and the usual rumours and 'latrinograms' just where the coming move would take them. Even the Brigadiers did not know. On 24 February **General Freyberg** interviewed them singly and disclosed their destination—a line to be held along the mountains of **Macedonia** (Northern Greece). He warned them that the move must not be discussed, even among themselves. On 26 February orders were issued to Divisional COs; but still no theatre of war was named.

From **Amiriya** units moved at the direction of **Middle East Movement Control**, whose ways seemed more than a little strange and caused the GOC much concern. He sailed from **Alexandria** with the first flight in **HMS York** on the morning of 6 March. Other 'grey funnels' in that historic convoy were HM Ships *Gloucester*, *Orion*, *Ajax*, *Breconshire* and *Bonaventure*. And as they waited on board for the time of departure our soldiers watched every kind of weapon and military vehicle moving to the ships, mostly small freighters, which were to carry this mass of equipment to **Greece**.

With it went the vehicles of Petrol Company, under command of Captain McDonagh, with one driver to each truck. On leaving camp they had just enough petrol to get them to the wharves at Alex. There fuel tanks were drained and the vehicles hoisted aboard. Their vessel was the *Thermopylae*. The balance of Petrol Company crossed with the third flight on 17 March in **HMAS Perth**. Major Dickson was OC Troops on board this vessel, which carried other units besides his own. He reports a very fast crossing (23 hours) in fine weather, and troops were treated with the usual excellent naval hospitality. The Company disembarked at **Piraeus**, the port of **Athens**, carrying field kits and rifles, and were taken by Army MT to their first camp at **Kifisia**, a few miles from the Greek capital.

True to their flair for independent action, on the night before embarkation some forty or fifty Petrol Company men took French leave

to go 'on the scoot' in Alex. They had decided, reasonably enough, that the fleshpots of the city were preferable to the trials and discomforts of the **Amiriya** transit camp, where conditions were, in fact, extremely disagreeable. And besides, there were reunions to be celebrated with friends and relatives recently arrived from the **United Kingdom**, and among the **4th Reinforcements** from New Zealand. There were also some fights.

So one of the first events for Petrol Company in the new country was a man-sized Orderly Room with most of the culprits duly arraigned. Similar ceremonies followed, as scores—real or imagined—were settled between the hard-bitten veterans of the First Echelon and the much-travelled warriors of the Second, who were still regarded as 'glamour boys' and 'Cooks' Tourists'.

Nevertheless, the Company soon coalesced, and all such nonsense ceased when the men were given a real job of work. In the meantime Captain McDonagh's private gaol, which had somehow found its way to **Greece**, along with his own private bath—a porcelain one—was kept fully stocked. This unofficial 'hoosegah' was made of sheet iron; and Erle **Stewart**¹ remembers helping once to bust it open and release the contents, which included his own special cobbler, Trevor **Casey**.² Casey, incidentally, was one of the Company's 'juveniles', and had enlisted for service when scarcely 18. But that did not prevent him from becoming a first-class soldier and a noted escapist from the Jerry 'bag', first in **Crete**, later in **Italy**.

Concerning these early-day orderly rooms in **Greece**, Second-Lieutenant Collins recalls one typical bright spot. He then had command of the Company's B Section, composed entirely of Second Echelon men. Following what must have been a pretty general Donnybrook, he found one morning virtually his whole section up on the carpet. Captain Ramsden, then second-in-command of the Company, treated them all to a stiff dressing-down. 'Some men behave like gentlemen', he thundered, 'others like mongrels'. Whereupon Collins's driver with a verbal side-kick at Major Dickson's batman (known to the Company as 'the gentleman's

gentleman'), remarked in an audible stage whisper: 'Then I must be the mongrel's mongrel'.

For the first few days it was 'roses, roses all the way' for our men in Greece. Once again they found themselves among friendly people in a friendly land. 'It reminds me', one man wrote, 'of the hills round Matau, and there are small herds of sheep—very poor specimens, more like a cross between a sheep and a goat, and mostly black. They are minded by shepherds, some women and some boys, but all very old-fashioned and poorly dressed. It is quite hot in the daytime; I am in shorts and singlet; but the nights are a bit cold.'

The Greek people gave the men a resounding welcome, showering their trucks with flowers, offering fruit, cigarettes, smiles and hospitality. Athens, by day, still had an air of gaiety, though there were few young men in the streets and many of the local folk wore black armbands, in mourning for relatives lost on the Albanian front. At night there was a curfew and a heavy blackout.

In a letter home one Petrol Company driver wrote:

It is great fun trying to make them understand what you want. The first night we landed we went into the local village (which was well back, and had a few wines) and tried to tell them that we wanted a feed of eggs and chips. But they could not understand until I went out into the kitchen and produced an egg, a potato, and the frying-pan. Then we duly got our meal—all for ninepence!

I had an afternoon leave from there to go into the capital, about twelve miles away.... arrived in the heart of the city and had a trim up and shampoo and then away for a bath at the local bathhouse, which was huge—six storeys high and nothing but bathrooms. We went up to the fourth floor, as there were soldiers waiting everywhere below. We found it just as bad up there, and had to wait for 1½ hours. But our turn finally came, and we were provided with towels and soap for 7d. and were supposed to tip the attendant about another 2½d.

We are quite used to the money now; it's a little more than double our pence to the £1.

There were some wonderful old ruins on the hills outside the town, but we had no time to go to them as it was nearly dark....

I must close now, dear, as I am on cookhouse fatigue today and it is getting near teatime; bully stew and hard biscuits, followed by rice and raisins tonight.

The Division's front-line units were also encamped among the hills, at [Hymettus](#), a few miles away from the ASC lines. But time was working against the Allies; so, after a brief rest there, our troops began their long trek northwards into the mountains of [Macedonia](#), where Greek troops were deployed across the path of the expected invasion. The New Zealanders were to hold the Aliakmon line, extending from the sea coast south of [Salonika](#) in a north-westerly direction to the Yugoslav border. If Yugoslavia stood firm, and resisted Axis pressure, the anticipated advance of the Germans from [Bulgaria](#) into northern [Greece](#) could well be halted at this line, which covered the vital passes through the mountains. But if the Yugoslavs 'broke' and allowed the Germans through, the Aliakmon line would not be worth the proverbial cupful of cold snow. German forces could then pour down through the [Monastir Gap](#) to [Florina](#) and [Kozani](#), encircle the Aliakmon positions, and put every soldier there in the bag.

Besides the New Zealand Division, the British Expeditionary Force in [Greece](#) was originally planned to include 1 Armoured Brigade, 6 Australian Division, the Polish Independent Brigade Group, and 7 Australian Division. Formations were to proceed to [Greece](#) in that order. But with General Rommel's sudden advance into [Cyrenaica](#) the Polish Brigade Group and 7 Australian Division were held back to defend [Tobruk](#). Sixth Australian Division arrived late; and so, when the Germans invaded northern [Greece](#) early in April, the New Zealand Division and 1 Armoured Brigade were the only British formations complete and in place in the forward area.

Their position was most precarious. Three Greek divisions (one of them only just formed) had been detailed to assist the British force; but they were poorly equipped, had few automatic weapons, little artillery, and no anti-tank guns. ‘My visit to the Greek Army’, writes **General Freyberg, ‘filled me with mixed feelings.... I was astonished to see that their first line transport was composed entirely of ox wagons and pack animals which of course could only travel a very limited distance in a day at a very slow speed—actually at a slower pace than troops could march.’ When the New Zealanders arrived, 19 Greek Division was withdrawn and moved to **Thrace**. This meant that our brigades had to prepare and hold a defensive position on a 28,500 yard front, right in the path of a German Balkan Army numbering twelve to fourteen divisions backed by armour and a vastly superior air force. On 3 April **General Freyberg** wrote in his diary: ‘The situation is a grave one; we shall be fighting against heavy odds in a plan that has been ill-conceived and one that violates every principle of military strategy.’ He considered that had the New Zealanders been forced to stay on that position and fight, the Division, with the whole of its equipment, would have been rounded up in the first phase of the campaign.**

Meanwhile Petrol Company and other NZASC units, all unaware of the dark clouds gathering, were constantly on the move over narrow winding roads under trying conditions. Thousands of tons of supplies of all kinds—petrol, food, ammunition, RE stores, hospital supplies, tents, boots, and blankets—were pouring into **Greece. All had to be uplifted, unscrambled, and delivered to the units, now taking up their positions amid the rain, ice and snow of the northern mountains. Sometimes troops were carried; and Petrol Company, in addition, bore the responsibility of ‘feeding’ the whole Division (whose headquarters was then at **Katerini**) with petrol, oil and lubricants, to keep its heterogeneous mass of transport moving.**

Alec Rusden wrote at this stage: ‘Went with my own officer, Capt Ramsden, on a sort of recce on the journey through **Greece, and for the first time started to serve in my correct capacity—that of S/Sgt of the**

Petrol Supply Detail. We were a small unit within the Company—one officer, one senior NCO, two corporals and one driver.’ In one form or another—sometimes just a corporal and a couple of other ranks, at other times a full-scale Petrol Issuing Section—the Petrol Supply Detail, operating a petrol point, became well known to the Division during later campaigns.

Its function was to ‘retail the juice’—sometimes from dumps, often from the trays of half-a-dozen trucks—to the transport of the fighting units. The Detail kept accounts of all issues made, and of stocks on hand, so that a daily statement of the Division's POL situation could be prepared by Petrol Company's commanding officer and submitted to HQ NZASC. From there **Divisional Headquarters was kept informed of the petrol position, upon which the Division's mobility depended.**

Bulk supplies came forward from a well-planned system of Base and Advanced Base Supply Depots, Forward Supply Depots, and Field Dumps, whose establishment and operation were the business of the DDST (Deputy Director of Supply and Transport, then Brigadier W. d'A. Collings). He kept in close touch with the tactical situation and made his dispositions accordingly.

Some three months before the main force had gone to **Greece a New Zealand unit (3 Section of 9 Railway Survey Company) went over to help survey the wide Thriasion Plain, west of **Athens**, where it was proposed to establish a depot for petrol and oil. This depot, however, was not constructed; and it was decided instead that petrol would be imported in bulk and sent forward in tins. The section also helped in a reconnaissance and survey of the Greek railway system—the upshot being a decision that supplies would be maintained by road, as the railways were short of rolling stock and, in any case, fully used by the Greeks.**

These decisions directly affected Petrol Company drivers, officers and NCOs, by determining the pattern of their operations in **Greece. A good motor road led from **Athens** to **Larisa**, and continued for some**

distance north-west. A branch of this road ran from **Kozani** to **Salonika**. Almost all the others were mere cart tracks, so road repair and construction was an added responsibility for the Division as it manned the so-called Aliakmon line. Parts of the main highway were mountainous, with all the hazards snow and ice create on a narrow, winding, steep-graded route.

The only first-class ports in **Greece** were **Piraeus** and **Salonika**, with a second-class one at **Volos**. There were a few smaller harbours, notably at **Stilis** and **Khalkis**, of some use for supply purposes, but they lacked facilities. Base Supply Depot for the Force was at **Athens** racecourse, with an Advanced Base at **Larisa**. The latter was to be supplied by rail and road from **Athens**, and by rail from **Volos**, since the road from **Volos** to **Larisa** was not good enough for truck transport. No use was made of the port facilities at **Salonika**.

To our Petrol Company drivers, then trying to cope with the exigencies of a supply situation which to them seemed more than a little crazy, the following report by the DDST, Brigadier Collings, will be illuminating:

Even before I arrived in **Greece**, some large consignments of supplies had arrived. Owing to the demands of secrecy, the Base Supply Depot had had no previous warning to expect them, and as soon as they did arrive the ships had to be unloaded and released and the docks cleared without any delay. The staff of the BSD was quite inadequate to control the situation, and when I visited the Depot, which was established on the **Athens** Racecourse, the morning following my arrival, I found a scene of the greatest confusion.

The grandstands were piled to the roof with supplies, a DID was trying to operate in the Totalisator Hall, and the race-track, for four furlongs, was one almost solid stack of supplies, all hopelessly mixed up and with an enormously high percentage of broken cases. On the far side of the course was a large stock of petrol and lubricants, and very close to it many thousand gallons of Molotov Cocktail mixture. The Depot had

no idea of what stocks they had, and even had personnel been available for stocktaking, this would have been a physical impossibility.

The OC was recovering from the effects of a broken pelvis, and was on crutches and hardly able to get from his car to his office without assistance; and of his two officers, one spent his whole time at the docks, and the other trying to load up convoys and trains. The Depot Supt, a Master Baker, who was making gallant efforts to deal with the situation, was at his wits' end.

The situation at **Larisa**, though on a smaller scale, was just as bad, if not worse. The DAQMG before my arrival had given orders, with the objects of relieving the strain on the BSD, helping to clear the docks, and making a start for an Advance Supply Depot, that trains should be loaded with supplies at the docks at **Piraeus**, and sent straight through to **Larisa**. The only RASC at that place was a det of 232 (Cypriot) Coy, who were instructed to do the best they could about these supplies until a Supply det arrived to take them over. As there was very little transport and labour, the supplies were unloaded onto the side of the line, which soon became very congested, and where there was no prospect of guarding them effectively. No way bills or convoy notes had been made out at the docks, and it was a physical impossibility for 232 Coy to check these supplies.

For the first phase of the Greek campaign, i.e., the period between the arrival of the Force at the beginning of March and the German declaration of war on **Greece** on 6 April, the following supply-line plan operated:

| | |
|---------------|---|
| Ports | — Piraeus and Volos |
| Base Area | — Athens |
| Advanced Base | — Larisa |
| FSDs | — Livadhion, Servia, Kozani |
| Field Dumps | — Katerini, Veroia, Edhessa, Amindaion |

Each FSD was to be kept stocked with ten days' supplies, and POL at the rate of 100 miles per vehicle for the portion of the Force which was

expected to be based on it. Two refills of ammunition were also to be stored near each FSD. At the forward dumps, POL at the rate of 100 miles per vehicle was stored, in addition to rations.

All transport units were pressed into service for local details as soon as they had any vehicles and until they were required to move forward. Included in these was the Divisional Petrol Company, which soon followed the Division on its three-day trek northward into the mountains. There the Company's base was at Sadovon in the Olympus Range, near the town of **Elasson**, some miles to the south of the front-line positions. Between them and the Division lay the famous **Mount Olympus** and the **Olympus** and **Servia** passes. Eastward, between the ranges and the coast, was the **Platamon** railway tunnel. The passes and the tunnel provided gateways through which Axis troops might move if they once secured a footing in northern **Greece**; so, besides manning, roading, and constructing defences on the virtually unprepared positions of the Aliakmon line, our Division was also required to prepare demolitions which would deny those vital defiles to the enemy.

Between Mount Olympus and the front line lay the town of **Katerini**, with good railway facilities, where Staff-Sergeant Rusden and Corporal **Fitzgerald**³ had been sent to prepare a Forward Petrol Dump for the Division.

‘Those were busy days’, Staff-Sergeant Rusden recalls, ‘with very little transport, and that only by courtesy of the Supply Company. I think Major **Pryde**⁴ was heartily sick of us by the time the Dump was finished. We were unofficially looked after by a wild-looking specimen of Greek manhood who flashed a dangerous-looking scimitar whenever we were watching him, and explained with extravagant gestures just what he would do to the Germans if they came. Jimmy was his name, and he had a long white beard. Eventually we completed the Divisional Dump with POL—but within a matter of hours came the order: “All POL to be loaded and railed south. Special train detailed. Immediate.” What a blow! But it had to be done, and on time, too. Fortunately I had some spare drachmæ, and was able to hire some Greek labour, so the train was

loaded and away on time. I heard later that the whole lot was blown sky-high not far down the line.'

By that time, of course, the gathering stormclouds had burst. On 6 April **Germany** attacked both **Greece** and **Yugoslavia**, crumpling their armies in very short order. For the British there was only one answer: a rapid withdrawal from the now untenable Aliakmon positions to the 'Line of the Passes' flanking **Mount Olympus**. On 7 April the Force Commander, General Wilson, gave orders for this; and so, nearly a month's work by the New Zealand Division, and a large proportion of its wire and mines, which had been put into the Aliakmon line, went by the board. Petrol Company aided the withdrawal by uplifting troops and supplies. During the last days of March and the first few days of April, our drivers had been flat out carting POL from **Larisa** to petrol points and to the forward dump at **Katerini**. From there, as we have seen, it was promptly sent south again, and some of it lost.

On 7 April a Petrol Company convoy of 35 3-ton and 18 30-cwt lorries uplifted the newly-arrived ? Australian Battalion with baggage and delivered the troops to their positions at **Vevi**. The vehicles brought a back-load of petrol from **Servia** to No. 5 FSD. Returning to camp at 9 a.m. next day, our trucks were despatched almost immediately in two convoys, one to uplift RE stores from **Katerini**, the other to load petrol and rations at **Kozani** and deliver them to No. 5 FSD. The latter task was completed and the vehicles back in camp by 11 p.m.

Two hours later (at 1 a.m.) the first convoy reported in with its load of RE stores, and was despatched, at 10 a.m. on 11 April, to the FSD, returning at midday. At 3 p.m. all Petrol Company trucks were ordered out on a three-fold mission: (1) to evacuate a Greek and an Australian battalion from **Amindaion** to **Kozani**; (2) return to the **Amindaion** area and bring out ammunition to **Kozani**; (3) return to **Amindaion** and retrieve stocks of POL. Since by then the enemy had reached **Salonika**, and the evacuation of the Aliakmon line was completed, this order was modified, the petrol and ammunition being taken instead to **Grevena**.

Lieutenant **Jackson**,⁵ the OC's liaison officer with the convoy, could find no trace of the Australian battalion, which had presumably been evacuated by other means. Many Greek soldiers were brought out, in a more or less demoralised state, and our drivers had some difficulty in getting them to quit the vehicles so they could carry out the rest of their assignment.

During this operation Lieutenant **Chissell's**⁶ section of twenty-two trucks received some attention from the *Luftwaffe*, and he showed great resource in getting his load-carriers out of trouble by leading them down a riverbed to **Trikkala**, and thence back to Petrol Company headquarters. Sergeant Greig also had a narrow escape with some trucks at **Kozani**, bringing them out just ahead of the Germans as they entered that town. This was a period of non-stop activity for Petrol Company drivers, who played a vital part in what **General Freyberg** has described as 'a most successful withdrawal to the Line of the Passes without loss of any kind'. All ammunition, petrol, and supplies dumped in forward areas were salvaged, all troops safely evacuated.

These operations were helped by prevailing drizzle and low cloud—the 'Miracle of the Mists'—which kept troops and transport largely out of sight from marauding aircraft. But in the days that followed there was no such heaven-sent cover; and since a marked absence of the **RAF** in **Greece** was often noted, with scathing appellations such as 'Rare As Fairies' and others more pungent, a word should be said about our air situation at that time. **General Freyberg** reports on it as follows:

When HQ first arrived at **Dolikhe** just south of **Olympus**, we saw British bomber formations with fighter escorts flying to the north-west and we heard reports of enemy tank columns being caught in defiles. These encouraging sights and items of news were, however, over in a few days. Our bombers at **Larisa** were destroyed on the ground together with some fighters in a raid by some fifty dive bombers. Our reserves were so small and our AA artillery was so inadequate that it was not possible to maintain squadrons at **Larisa**, where constant large fighter patrols would

have been necessary. As it was, on the front and over the back areas huge formations of enemy bombers operated without interference. We heard reports from the south of heroic encounters between Hurricanes and enemy formations outnumbering them by four and five to one, but that could not last long. The RAF was swept from the skies as far as we were concerned.

Air Vice-Marshal D'Albiac, commanding the **RAF** in **Greece**, has written: 'Expressed in terms of aircraft, my total serviceable strength in the country was some eighty aircraft, to which were opposed, according to all reports, approximately 800 German aircraft on the Eastern Front (**Bulgaria** and Roumania) and 160 Italian aircraft based in **Albania** plus 150 based in **Italy** but operating over **Albania** and **Greece**, mainly from advanced landing grounds in **Albania**.' It had been hoped that more squadrons could be diverted to **Greece** from the **Middle East**; but on the contrary it became necessary to reinforce air strength there to prevent Rommel's thrust from developing into a serious threat to Egypt. Even those reinforcements were inadequate, since between 1 January and 31 March 1941 British aircraft losses in the **Middle East** totalled 184, replacements 166.

By 13 April all Petrol Company vehicles had returned to Company Headquarters at Sadovon, where they immediately packed up and left for a new camp area at **Dhomenikon**, farther down the Sadovon- **Larisa** road. Next day while carting ammunition from **Tirnavos** to No. 5 FSD, under attack from enemy aircraft, Driver **Bennett**⁷ was killed.⁸ On the 15th all vehicles were standing by, awaiting instructions to commence one of the Company's most notable and meritorious jobs—the evacuation of **4 NZ Infantry Brigade** from its outflanked positions at **Servia Pass**. This was part of yet another large-scale withdrawal—a general retreat, in fact—which was to take the whole British force back to a line across the narrow southern part of **Greece** in the **Lamia- Molos- Thermopylae** area.

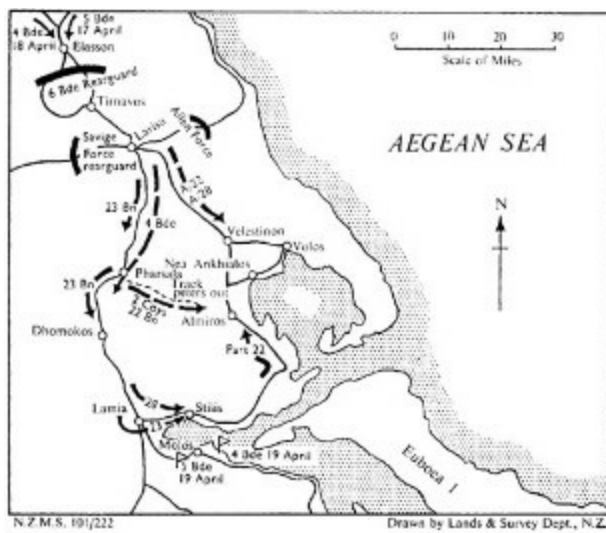
At Sadovon the Company had been attached to Rear Headquarters of **6 Australian Division**, with OG Petrol Company receiving his orders through that division's Brigadier Bird. For on 6 April New Zealanders and

Australians had again combined to fight as an Army Corps, under command of the veteran Australian, Thomas Blamey. On 12 April this 1 Australian Corps was renamed, with a fitting exchange of compliments, **2 Anzac Corps**.

Early in the morning of 17 April Major Dickson received a signal from Commander NZASC instructing that the Divisional Petrol Company, plus a section from Divisional Ammunition and a section from Divisional Supply, were to proceed that evening at 5.30 to an area near the **Servia Pass**, uplift 4 Brigade, and move it back to positions south of **Lamia**. While that was being done, Workshops and Company HQ were to proceed back along the **Larisa- Volos- Lamia** road to a new bivouac area ten miles outside **Atalandi**.

Major Dickson assumed command of the troop-carrying convoy, with instructions that the head of his column was not to pass the junction of the **Servia- Olympus** roads before 1 a.m. on 18 April. Captain McDonagh, in charge of Petrol Company details scheduled to move south, immediately volunteered to take Dickson's place and go forward with the northbound convoy, but that was refused. Quartermaster details with the Division's reserve clothing and blankets, which the Company was then carrying, were ordered to remain near the roadside and join the troop-carrying column when it returned from the north. As Petrol Company vehicles were moving out, Dickson had a call from OC **4 RMT** Company (Major **Woods** ⁹) whose own trucks were then going forward to bring out 6 Brigade from its positions near **Elasson**.

Fortunately the weather was still misty and overcast, so there was little interference on the northward journey from



N.Z.M.S. 101/222 Drawn by Lands & Survey Dept., N.Z.
4 AND 5 BRIGADES WITHDRAW TO THERMOPYLAE, 17-19 APRIL 1941

4 AND 5 BRIGADES WITHDRAW TO THERMOPYLAE, 17-19 APRIL 1941

enemy aircraft. Our Company made its rendezvous as scheduled, the OC and Captain Ramsden checking the first troop-laden vehicles past the **Olympus- Servia** road-junction 'bang on' the appointed time, 1 a.m. On the way back they picked up the QM details, as arranged, but left the reserve clothing. Dickson, however, was then faced with a dilemma: whether to take his column, as ordered, down the **Larisa- Volos** road to **Molos**—a secondary road in very poor condition—or whether to pursue the alternative main route, down the middle of the peninsula from **Larisa** through **Pharsala** to **Lamia**, and thence on to **Molos**.

This doubt arose from a despatch received earlier from Captain McDonagh, who had already taken his Workshops Section and other odds-and-ends along the **Larisa- Volos** road, and reported it to be impassable for the main column on account of thick mud and other obstacles. Dickson passed this information on to Colonel Gentry¹⁰ at Divisional Headquarters and asked permission to move via the **Larisa- Lamia** route, undertaking to disperse all vehicles widely in the fields beside the road if the brigade column got held up, as expected, by traffic congestion south of **Larisa**.

In the meantime McDonagh's information about the state of the **Volos** road had been confirmed by a reconnaissance party from **Divisional Headquarters**, and orders were issued to change the routes,

both of 4 Brigade and the 5th, which was now travelling ahead. Dickson does not seem to have received this order; but in any case he 'took the right track' and led his 4 Brigade convoy on through **Larisa** (which he entered at daybreak) and continued until halted, by a jam of traffic on the road, a few miles south of the town.

The 18th April dawned bright and clear, with no protecting mists—and enemy bombers were soon in sight. Dickson sent Don Rs along the halted column ordering it to disperse widely in the fields, where troops could debuss and go to ground, taking advantage of whatever natural cover there was. Dive-bombing and strafing commenced and continued throughout the morning. By 2.30 p.m. the column moved again. Bombing and strafing resumed during the afternoon, causing more halts; but the main convoy reached 4 Brigade Headquarters at **Molos** during the night, under command of Captain Hook. Dickson had gone back up the road with his own car and a Workshops truck to pick up about thirty stragglers from 4 Brigade, who, after an exhausting week, had fallen asleep in the fields and had been left there when the column moved on.

Official records describe this withdrawal of 4 Brigade, executed under the most nerve-racking conditions at a cost of only thirty casualties, in the following terms:

The move south proceeded smoothly until a few miles beyond **Larisa**, where not only was the single road jammed with Anzac Corps traffic of all descriptions, but the whole was held up by a Partially destroyed bridge near **Pharsala**. The day was clear and fine, and the enemy air force was out in strength, quite unopposed. It appeared that, on the plain, air attacks were confined to very low-level bombing attacks, and machine-gunning; the dive bombing was concentrated on the pass at **Pharsala**. Soon no vestige of discipline existed on the road. Vehicles of all sizes were struggling to get as far south as possible in the quickest time. No interval was kept between vehicles, which made it easier for the enemy to inflict damage from the air. At times there were as many as four vehicles abreast on the road, all trying to gain the lead. Each vehicle might stop as much as twenty times during the long afternoon

while its passengers took cover on the roadside.

Nothing could have been worse for morale than this constant stopping of vehicles and scattering of troops. A look-out would drum vigorously on the roof of the cab; the driver would clamp on the brake there and then, regardless of the position of his vehicle on the road; all on board would scramble for cover. All traffic would be blocked until the last passenger came back to his transport. Perhaps a vehicle, or two together, would be set on fire by bomb splinters or machine-gun incendiary bullets. This would cause further delays, until the offending vehicle was shunted off the road.

Unfortunately orders to get off the roads and disperse were given by various authorities at various points, orders not uniformly carried out, with the result that unit convoys—already somewhat scattered through joining the main stream of traffic at irregular intervals—became inextricably mixed. The efforts of some drivers to ‘catch up’ with what they considered their proper place in the convoy added to the chaos. At one stage in the afternoon Lt-col [Gray](#), ¹¹ CO [18 Bn](#), went along a portion of the convoy and told all [18 Bn](#) vehicles to keep moving despite the bombing—‘The men showed in their faces their relief and faith in this course, which in the circumstances should have been insisted on everywhere.’ But of course all commanders and drivers would not be of the same opinion, nor did the frequent blockages caused by craters and destroyed vehicles permit such a procedure.

In many of the accounts of this difficult day different people have laid the blame at different doors for the incredibly chaotic conditions. Some have blamed the Australians and the abandoned and unguarded beer canteen at [Larisa](#). It does seem that the road discipline in Australian units was not particularly high at this stage, even taking into account the natural inclination of drivers consulted to point out faults in others that were overlooked in their own countrymen. Then again others have stated that the policy of stopping during an air attack was wrong—this is probably so, but it was inevitable. Another has taken the

view, considering the amount of traffic on the road, the scale of the enemy air attacks, the complete lack of experience of the majority of all drivers of such conditions, that the move was a remarkably successful, and creditable, performance. This view appears to be realistic and final.

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By comparison, the withdrawal of 5 Brigade was a very confused and frustrating affair. Attempts to turn the convoy eastward to a staging place at **Almiros**, near **Volos**, led to some amazing adventures, with a number of units quite befogged as to where they were expected to go. For example, D Company and most of C Company, 22 Battalion, had been turned off the road at **Pharsala** and diverted down a third-rate road that petered out in a mule-track to the north-west of **Almiros**. The Battalion Commander, Lieutenant-Colonel Andrew, VC, ¹³ reached a point north of **Almiros** about 8 a.m. on 18 April with only two 3-ton vehicles following him. Other elements were diverted at **Lamia**, sent in the direction of **Volos** and then turned back, ending up near **Molos**, where the battalion eventually concentrated with the rest of 5 Brigade.

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During the withdrawal Petrol Company lost ten vehicles destroyed by enemy action and sustained some casualties. **Norman Chissell**, a most promising young officer, and an original member of the Ammunition Company, was killed by bomb blast. Drivers **Cant** ¹⁵ and **Corry**, ¹⁶ both excellent fellows, also gave their lives. Driver H. W. Morgan was mortally wounded, while several others received wounds, the list including Second-Lieutenant F. Trewby, Sergeant L. A. Crawley, Drivers **Asher**, ¹⁷ **Cashmere**, ¹⁸ and **Rowe**. ¹⁹

This operation also brought the Company another decoration: a Military Medal for Corporal K. A. Bailey. With seven trucks under his charge, Bailey was attached to Second-Lieutenant Fenton's ²⁰ Divisional Ammunition group, which brought out 20 Battalion from the vicinity of its rearguard positions two miles south of **Servia**. At Nikaia, six or seven miles past **Larisa**, the convoy was ordered to leave the road and disperse while sappers cleared the approach to a badly damaged bridge.

‘Harry Dunlop ²¹ was my driver’, Ken Bailey recalls, ‘and after lunch he went off to have a sleep under a tree. Because of the need to be ready to move, I suggested that he stick close to the truck, but he preferred the tree. That probably saved his life, because about an hour later two Jerry planes skimmed over a rise and dropped their bombs from about a hundred feet up. The bombs fell on the ground and just lay there.

‘Reg Pollock ²² and I, who were filling our water bottles at the water truck, lost no time in diving under the vehicle. We lifted our heads to see what was going to happen. The bombs were lying on the ground in a line right through my trucks. Just then they exploded, and Harry's truck was riddled. Five out of the seven trucks went up, and there were many casualties among the poor infantry, who were sleeping in and under the vehicles.

‘Things were quite sticky for a while as Jerry kept coming back to strafe us. Reg Pollock ducked his head just in time to miss a piece of shrapnel which skimmed along his back and cut his web equipment in half. Harry Dunlop, owing to his liking for that tree, also lived on.’

Undeterred by the machine-gunning, Bailey, with several drivers, and Sergeant Buckleigh ²³ of the Ammunition Company, immediately began attending to the wounded, getting them into the shelter of a small hollow.

Concerning the withdrawal, Staff-Sergeant Rusden, comments:

S/Sgt Williams and I were the last to move on that trip, travelling on the breakdown truck. We had an interesting half-hour before we started, whispering in the darkness and cutting the harness off a couple of dozen donkeys which had been abandoned with their heavy panniers still on their backs. Were they pleased! The withdrawal was a fairly hazardous affair but in the main was carried out well. We holed up on a hillside near Atalandi and established the Company again as a going concern.

The idea then was to hold the enemy where outflanking would be more difficult on a **Molos- Thermopylae- Brallos** line, behind which Greek resistance could be reorganised. But it soon became evident that such resistance was out of the question. On 22 April the Greek Army surrendered. Wavell could do nothing more. The great **Balkan** gamble had not come off. The only alternative to losing the entire British force in **Greece** lay in evacuation.

This possibility had been allowed for, of course, from the start; and Admiral Cunningham has said that evacuation and its problems—which would fall to him—had never been far from his mind since the decision was reached to go to **Greece**. But with the enemy's overwhelming superiority in the air, and his land forces pressing strongly down the peninsula, the chances of a successful sea withdrawal looked far from bright.

Meanwhile, fighting on land continued. There was strong pressure by the triumphant Germans, bitter delaying actions by our rearguards. Sixth Brigade, plus all the New Zealand artillery, engaged the enemy at **Molos**; 4 Brigade delayed him at **Kriekouki**, south of **Thebes**, and again at **Porto Rafti**. But the big problem for Petrol Company after the withdrawal to the **Thermopylae** line was how and where to find petrol. According to Force Headquarters, dumps were being established at Kifissokhori, **Levadhia**, and on the coast road four miles north of **Livanatais**. But by 20 April no POL was available at any of the given dump locations, so Colonel Crump arranged for a general search.

From their much-bombed and machine-gunned camp near **Atalandi**, Petrol Company drivers shared in this search, splitting off into groups which ranged far afield. One detachment of six vehicles, with six from Supply Column, all under Second-Lieutenant Ward, reached the railway station at **Levadhia** in the early hours of 21 April. There they found a train, loaded partly with petrol and partly with ammunition, drawn up at a siding. Neatly stacked about 20 feet away were 2000 rounds of high-explosive shells and mines. And to this nice little target came the

Luftwaffe while Ward and his party were busy loading.

Direct hits set the train on fire, exploding its 25- and 60- pounder shells. At the height of the inferno Driver Macdonald ²⁴ of Supply Column, and an Australian sergeant (H. Killalea), uncoupled the burning wagons, found a locomotive several hundred yards away (abandoned by its terrified Greek crew) and managed to get it coupled to a string of twenty-eight undamaged trucks containing petrol, oil, and ammunition. These they drove away to safety; then they came back to help the others, who, throughout the raid, which continued for an hour, calmly went on removing oil, shells and mines from the burning section of the train.

On one of these quests, Second-Lieutenant Collins of Petrol Company was driving along beside a canal when a Greek civilian came rushing up, waving his arms and shouting the only English word he knew: 'Bastard! Bastard!' It soon became clear he wasn't referring to Collins, but to someone under a large culvert spanning the canal.

Collins advanced cautiously, with pistol drawn. Huddled beneath the culvert he found two German airmen who had crashed their plane and baled out. One, a mere youngster, was plainly terrified; and not without reason, for as the Jerries were being taken away, Greek civilians swarmed around the Petrol Company truck, demanding that the prisoners be handed over so they could tear them to pieces. The hatred on the people's faces, Collins says, was frightening. He handed the airmen over to some redcaps at an Australian headquarters, where he first got news of the intended evacuation. One officer there, a trifle tiddly, was giving stuff away wholesale—including a bottle of whisky to Lieutenant Collins, with the parting remark: 'Well cheerio, Major!' He had evidently mistaken the New Zealander's lonely pip for a crown.

By 23 April sufficient POL had been found to enable the Division to move to embarkation beaches. On that day, twenty-eight Petrol Company vehicles loaded from a dump at Elatia and made deliveries to units in the line. They uplifted troops of **5 NZ Infantry Brigade** and

carried them direct to embarkation areas east of **Athens**. Captain McDonagh commanded the column, while Major Dickson took Company Headquarters and Workshops on ahead to **Athens**. Petrol Company vehicles not required for these moves were handed over to Major **McGuire**²⁵ at a dispersal area near the coast road, for destruction along with other NZASC transport. All Company records, manuals, surplus clothing and so on were also burned. Each man retained only his rifle, steel helmet, greatcoat and pack, into which he crammed as much food and cigarettes—freely available from supply dumps now being demolished—as he could carry.

All this went on in an atmosphere of uncertainty and distrust, and a brooding sense of failure. What would tomorrow bring? Were the Greeks *really* our friends—already their armies in the west had surrendered—and were we not letting them down rather badly? There were rumours, too, of German parachute landings at **Corinth**; so perhaps escape was already cut off. Precise and reliable information, on almost any matter, just wasn't available.

Dickson took his convoy to a camp near an aerodrome outside **Athens**, where he ordered the destruction of Workshops vehicles. He then reported to Army Headquarters at the Hotel Acropole, in the city. There he was instructed, he says, to make a reconnaissance of the beach at **Porto Rafti** and report back. He did this, but he could get no information as to the embarkation point for 5 Brigade and the Petrol Company drivers with it, or where his own Headquarters and Workshops Sections would embark. Eventually he found out from Royal Navy Movement Control that **Porto Rafti** was the place.

Still in the forward area, Captain McDonagh had sixteen empty vehicles in hand, and he was ordered to take these to **Levadhia** and pick up more petrol. They found only 4000 gallons, which they loaded and delivered to forward units. Thirteen of the trucks were then destroyed, the other three carrying troops to **Athens** for embarkation. This, and a detail on the following day (25 April), when six trucks picked up petrol at **Athens** and delivered it to dumps on the roadside, were Petrol Company's

last operations as an ASC unit in **Greece**; the last anywhere, in fact, for some considerable time. Staff-Sergeant Rusden wrote:

The last night as a complete Unit was spent by Capt McDonagh, Cpl **Rimmer**,²⁶ Dvr **Walsh**²⁷ and myself in a little hut, discussing our moves for the next few days. Next day we moved off to obtain petrol from a dump a long way south. When found, there was not as much as we thought, so Capt McDonagh ordered me to take up what was there and said he would locate more even if he had to go to **Athens** for it.

As everything was in a terrific hurry I didn't have time to get my clothing from his car, and set off with just trousers and shirt, a.45 and some tobacco. All my personal possessions were in his car and I never saw them again. Capt McDonagh was sidetracked further south and eventually went to **Crete** where he was killed. We went back up near the line and I took over a Supply Dump from Capt **Davis**²⁸ of the Supply Coln, and we used this as a Petrol Refilling Point. The whole of the Div, or what remained of it, was serviced; and we were visited by Col Crump, who told us that we would be on our own from then on.

The Dump was laden with supplies—some kinds never seen by the troops—so we destroyed all we could. During the night some of



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us stood by the roadside in the darkness and when the retreating troops rumbled by we threw various tins of fruit and cartons of tobacco onto the backs of the trucks. Some of the comments were 'out of this world'; but generally, after the chaps had identified the contents of the parcels, a wide variety of 'thanks very much' would float back through the night. I like to think we did a good job that night, and that the foodstuffs etc were not wasted, but have never come across anyone who was in those trucks.

Later on, the trek to the beaches began. I didn't know where to go, but had a message from HQ telling us to make for a certain beach. We were only 15 strong by then, so destroyed surplus vehicles and away. What a trip! Reached **Athens** early in the morning and was accosted by some pip-squeak who said he was from Army HQ. He was very rude to me, so I threatened to shoot him. He then invited me to accompany him to HQ, which I accepted; but he bolted through the door there like a rabbit, and instructed troops on guard to forbid me entrance. When I told my story to the guards they said 'O.K., Kiwi. Go on in and shoot the bastard if you want to.'

Eventually found the beach—forget the name of it—and more troubles began. No-one would take any notice of my small group, and we were given the brush-off repeatedly. However, I found an officer's coat and Sam Browne on the beach and put them on. Didn't at any time say I was an officer, but found the coat and accessories very useful. The bloke I was talking to couldn't see under the coat and maybe thought I outranked him, so we 15 were embarked in due course. Waded through the surf to ships' boats, and thence to a destroyer. Boy—were they good to us on that ship!!!

Unfortunately, later in the night we hove to alongside a tramp- ship and were ordered to change over. Nets and things helped the change. After half the destroyer's passengers had made the change, weather and other conditions caused the Captain to stop any further hanging about, so the Tramp made off to Egypt, and the Destroyer went to **Crete**. In the

morning I found my complement was down to seven. The other eight were on the Destroyer still. The trip back was not so good; but **Alexandria** looked fine when we arrived.

We seven were unitless, and later found we were posted missing, since the whole company except us were stationed in **Crete**, and later had a very rough time when the dirty business started. We enjoyed ourselves for a day or two, keeping out of the way. But one day I was spotted by Col Crump in the **NAAFI**. He was very interested in our doings since we had seen him last, and then instructed me to 'get my Headquarters going again' and report to him in the morning. What a business! I took **Richards** ²⁹ with me when we went to see the Chief. He had nothing—not even a pencil—but there was a tent.

I did my best, and eventually NZASG HQ (Egypt) began to function again. Col Crump's chief concern was his Units in **Crete**; and I have seldom seen a man so distressed as when the casualties began to come in. Eventually the Petrol Company came back— 60 strong from an original 301.... and the remnants were awful glad to be back in filthy Egypt.

By nightfall on 25 April, Major Dickson had got his Workshops, Headquarters and G Sections together at Daphne 2, an Australian camp about ten miles from **Marathon**, close to the embarkation beaches. He then set off at 11.30 p.m. to locate and bring in A and B Sections, which were still with 5 Brigade after bringing it down from **Molos**. By 2 a.m. on 26 April most of the Company had safely embarked on HM Transport **Glengyle**—though Major Dickson was noticed by 'Skin' **Thompson** ³⁰ about that time 'still worrying like Hell over a group of chaps [presumably Rusden's detachment] who had not shown up'.

Bill Ambrose's story of the evacuation is a typical one:

I had had visions of having to wade or even swim. After reading the story of **Dunkirk** some sort of discomfort seemed to be inevitable, but when my turn came I just walked onto a barge without even seeing the

water. It was all so easy. At the ship's side we encountered our only bit of trouble. Had to climb up the side. In the dark it seemed a long way but it proved easy enough.

The trip to **Crete** was made without incident—almost. The ship was attacked once but not hit, and the plane went into the sea. Arrived in **Suda Bay** late afternoon, 26th April.

¹ **Sgt E. R. Stewart; New Plymouth; born NZ 17 Nov 1911; mechanic.**

² **Dvr R. T. Casey; New Plymouth; born Wellington, 31 Aug 1921; plumber; p.w. 1 Jun 1941; escaped Aug 1941; p.w. 24 Nov 1941; escaped Sep 1943.**

³ **Capt J. M. Fitzgerald; born NZ 19 May 1917; civil servant.**

⁴ **Maj N. M. Pryde, MBE, ED; Papakura; born Waikaka Valley, Southland, 6 May 1899; bank accountant; OC Sup Coy Mar 1941-Dec 1942; 2 Amn Coy Dec 1942-Jun 1943.**

⁵ **Lt E. J. Jackson; Christchurch; born Greymouth, 4 Mar 1906; company representative; wounded 20 May 1941.**

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

⁷ **Dvr F. H. Bennett; born NZ 1 Jul 1911; bus driver; killed in action 14 Apr 1941.**

⁸ **Dvr Bennett was Petrol Company's first casualty from enemy action.**

⁹ **Maj B. A. N. Woods; Wellington; born NZ 2 Jul 1892; traveller; 1 NZEF (Auck Mtd Rifles and Anglo-Russian Armd Car Bde); OC**

ASC Comp Coy 7 Nov-1 Dec 1940; Base Sup Coy Dec 1940-Feb 1941; **4 RMT** Coy Feb-Jun 1941.

¹⁰ Maj-Gen Sir William Gentry, KBE, CB, DSO and bar, m.i.d., MC (Gk), Bronze Star (US); **Lower Hutt**; born **London**, 20 Feb 1899; Regular soldier; served North-West Frontier 1920-22; GSO II NZ Div 1939-40; AA & QMG 1940-41; GSO I May 1941, Oct 1941-Sep 1942; comd **6 Bde** Sep 1942-Apr 1943; Deputy Chief of General Staff 1943-44; comd NZ Troops in Egypt, 6 NZ Div, and NZ **Maadi Camp**, Aug 1944-Feb 1945; **9 Bde (Italy)** 1945; Deputy Chief of General Staff, 1946-47; Adjutant-General, 1949-52; Chief of General Staff 1952-55.

¹¹ **Brig J. R. Gray**, ED, m.i.d.; born **Wellington**, 7 Aug 1900; barrister and solicitor; CO **18 Bn** Sep 1939-Nov 1941; Mar-Jun 1942; comd **4 Bde** 29 Jun-5 Jul 1942; killed in action 5 Jul 1942.

¹² *The Campaign In Greece*, unpublished narrative, **New Zealand War History Branch**.

¹³ **Brig L. W. Andrew**, VC, DSO, m.i.d.; **Wellington**; born Ashhurst, 23 Mar 1897; Regular soldier; Wellington Regt, 1915-19; CO **22 Bn** Jan 1940-Feb 1942; comd **5 Bde** 27 Nov-6 Dec 1941; Area Commander, **Wellington**, 1943-46; Commander, Central Military District, 1948-52.

¹⁴ Sec W. G. McClymont, *To Greece*, for a full account of the withdrawal to the **Thermopylae** line.

¹⁵ **Dvr I. E. Cant**; born **Wellington**, 21 Oct 1917; bootmaker; killed in action 18 Apr 1941.

¹⁶ **Dvr E. L. Corry**; born Hastings, 20 Aug 1916; taxi driver; died of wounds 14 May 1941.

¹⁷ **S-Sgt L. Asher**; born **Wellington**, 20 Sep 1906; motor driver;

wounded Apr 1941.

¹⁸ **Dvr W. Cashmere; Levin;** born NZ 22 Sep 1909; barman; wounded Apr 1941.

¹⁹ **Dvr M. H. Rowe; New Plymouth;** born NZ 27 May 1905; driver; wounded Apr 1941; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

²⁰ **Maj J. D. Fenton, MBE, ED, m.i.d.; Wellington;** born Waitara, 24 Jul 1912; foreman motor mechanic; wounded 2 Jun 1944; DADME, Central Military District, 1947-59.

²¹ **Dvr H. Dunlop;** born NZ 2 Oct 1907; motor driver; p.w. 1 Jun 1941; died Napier, 11 Feb 1955.

²² **Dvr C. R. Pollock;** Dunedin; born NZ 27 May 1915; bagmaker; wounded 22 May 1941.

²³ **Lt A. J. Buckleigh;** Taupo; born NZ 11 Oct 1910; motor mechanic.

²⁴ **Dvr J. G. Macdonald, MM;** born Oamaru, 18 Jun 1909; clerk; killed in action 2 Jun 1941.

²⁵ **Lt-Col W. A. T. McGuire, ED, m.i.d.; Wellington;** born NZ 22 Dec 1905; police officer and motor engineer; OC Amm Coy Oct 1939-Oct 1941; OC NZ Base ASC 1941-44.

²⁶ **Capt A. T. Rimmer;** Lower Hutt; born NZ 1 Apr 1915; clerk.

²⁷ **Sgt J. Walsh;** Petone; born NZ 21 Apr 1910; barman; wounded and p.w. Jun 1941.

²⁸ **Maj E. P. Davis;** Nelson; born NZ 4 May 1904; salesman; actg OC Sup Coln Sep-Nov 1940; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

²⁹ Dvr F. F. Richards; born New Plymouth, 21 Jul 1907; labourer.

³⁰ Dvr E. B. Thompson, MM, m.i.d., Johnsonville; born Wellington, 17 Jan 1910; labourer; wounded 25 May 1941; p.w. 27 May 1941.

PETROL COMPANY

CHAPTER 8 – CRETE

CHAPTER 8

Crete

THE bulk of Petrol Company reached **Crete** on 26 April, minus trucks and other equipment. Seven other ranks found their way back to Egypt; two small detachments, away petrol-hunting when the main exodus began, turned up on **Crete** two days later, in HMS *Kingston* and HMAS *Perth*. For Petrol Company the passage was swift and uneventful. The whole evacuation provided a classic example of the skill, daring and endurance of the **Royal Navy**. Winston Churchill writes:

The organised withdrawal of over fifty thousand men from **Greece** under the conditions prevailing might well have seemed an almost hopeless task.... At Dunkirk on the whole we had air mastery. In Greece the Germans were in complete and undisputed control of the air and could maintain an almost continuous attack on the ports and on the retreating Army. ¹

That so many got safely away is also due largely to successful delaying tactics by the New Zealand Division, which fought stern rearguard actions throughout the long retreat.

Churchill again pays graceful tribute:

Everyone in **Britain** has watched with gratitude and admiration the grand fighting deeds of the New Zealand Division upon the ever-famous battlefields of **Greece**. It is only gradually that we have learned and are learning the full tale, and the more the accounts come in the more we realise the vital part you played in a task of honour and a deed of fame. Throughout the whole Empire and the English-speaking world the name of New Zealand is saluted. ²

Petrol Company's share in that 'task of honour and deed of fame' has already been described—the weeks of hazardous driving by day and by night to bring out men and materials; the control and delivery of POL when supplies were plentiful; the unremitting search over wide areas

when supply lines had failed and the Division, hard-pressed, was 'scratching' for petrol. And now, deprived of their trucks, with no bayonets, no entrenching tools, few automatic weapons, and hardly enough rifles to go round, Petrol Company were scheduled to play an unrehearsed part in yet another deed of fame—the defence, as infantrymen, of the island of **Crete**.

From the defence angle, that island was woeful. It faced the wrong way round. Its one main road ran east-west roughly parallel to the northern coastline, a length of about 160 miles. Along it were strung the vital airfields of **Maleme**, **Retimo** and **Heraklion**, the main port at **Suda**, and the chief town, **Canea**. All were wide open to air and sea attack from the large German forces now massing in southern **Greece**, while the eastern end lay within easy striking distance of Italian bases in the Dodecanese Islands. Supplies and reinforcements had to run the gauntlet and land in the north, since the southern coast lacked harbours. Inland the island was mountainous, with steep gorges and serrated ranges rising to 6000 feet, making communications, other than by the coast road, extremely difficult.

Obviously, the key-points in any pattern of defence would be the three airfields plus the **Suda- Canea** area. Each had to be self-contained and self-supporting. With the shortage of transport and connecting routes there was no way of moving central reserves to a threatened point once the main road was cut and held by the enemy. Such was the situation which faced **General Freyberg** when, on 30 April, he was charged with the task of defending **Crete**. His Creforce, as it was called, consisted of 42,500 British, Greek and Imperial troops, plus from 4000 to 5000 unarmed Cypriots and Palestinians. For good measure there were many unarmed stragglers from **Greece**, 15,000 Italian prisoners, and the King of the Hellenes. An additional headache was a civilian population of 400,000 who, because of the blockade, now had great difficulty in providing their own sustenance.

But with Petrol Company, spilling out in the sunshine on to **Suda's** single wharf, such questions of broad strategy weighed little. For them

this sunny island, with its blue skies, snowy mountains, green fields and pleasant olive groves meant rest, and a haven from the hammering *Luftwaffe* and the pursuing *Wehrmacht*. True, an air-raid warning greeted their arrival; but nothing came of it, so they piled in happily with the stream of assorted soldiery—men from a dozen different countries wearing the motley remnants of a score of different uniforms—straggling through the dusty streets of **Suda**. Beyond the town were pleasant roadside cafés, and white cottages with gardens and smiling villagers who plied the troops with wine and oranges. Here all was peace and friendship—or so it seemed.

Their first staging place was an assembly point two or three miles from **Suda**. There the troops queued up for a scanty handout of bread and cheese, one tin of bully to every three men, and unlimited quantities of army biscuit. They ate with their fingers, then scavenged for empty tins to hold their issue of tea. Here the sick and wounded were sorted out for evacuation. The remainder marched westward to a transit ‘camp’ lacking tents, blankets, bedding; it had no buildings, no cooking facilities, no tools to dig latrines or bury refuse. The men were allocated in groups to mighty olive trees, each bearing a number, beneath whose gnarled trunks they sank down to sleep, or to watch the friendly stars as they twinkled through the branches. On this first trek, Padre **Hiddlestone**³ had managed to hire himself a fiacre—Cretan version of the Egyptian gharry—and so he proceeded with dignity and ease.

In the general ‘shemozzle’ of the evacuation 6 NZ Infantry Brigade had been directed back to Egypt without the knowledge of our GOC—a serious loss, and one deeply felt when the fighting developed. Thus New Zealand troops on **Crete** consisted of two battered infantry brigades; several hundred artillery- men without guns (they eventually acquired some); 1100 ASC personnel without trucks; seven officers and 180 other ranks of **Divisional Signals**; some personnel of Divisional Cavalry and 27 MG Battalion; three companies of engineers; medical details, and an assorted group of specialists, most of whom were evacuated, along with about fifty New Zealand nursing sisters, early in the piece. As OC troops

for one group of evacuees went Major Dickson, the command of Petrol Company then passing to Captain McDonagh. Dickson recalls that one of the first men he met on returning to Egypt was the Company's keenest gambler, who generously offered the major a partnership in his flourishing crown-and-anchor business.

Petrol Company's next move was to **Ay Marina**, farther along the road towards **Maleme**. Shuffling alongside our own marching cohorts went two shaggy Tommies, one bearing a Lewis gun, the other a field telephone. They were quickly pounced on by a pukka British officer from the original **Crete** garrison, who made unfriendly comment: 'Soldier! You haven't shaved or washed today!' Whereupon some of Petrol Company, themselves for the most part unshaven and unkempt, chanted in unison: 'You dirty-looking B—s! You dirty-looking B—s!'

At Ay Marina, on 28 April, Petrol Company was decanted and rebottled as part of an infantry battalion made up of the 1100 NZASC men. This formation—a short-lived one—had Major McGuire as OC and Captain **Hood**⁴ as Adjutant. Its members had been issued two days earlier with rations, blankets, and ammunition. They were now allotted a sector to defend against possible invasion by paratroops. But business in that line was slack at the time; and even among the officers few really thought it a serious possibility. Our drivers stood-to at dusk and at dawn; they mounted guard, went out on patrol. They took a fresh interest in oil-bottle and pull-through, kept their barrels shiny, their bolts as laid down in the Little Red Book—'clean, bright and slightly oiled'. Some, at times, got slightly oiled themselves (the wine of the country proving a suitable lubricant) during visits to **Canea** or the local hostelries. Some played poker for imaginary piastres. Others found time to write letters home.

April 28:

A few lines to let you know I am still well and have weathered the storm so far. I expect you have heard Haw-Haw say where we are.

Had to go out on a ration party last night; arrived back in camp at 2 a.m., after scrambling over the hills for four hours with a kerosene tin full of rations in either hand, rifle over your back, tin-hat sometimes on your head, but mostly rolling down the slopes and you after it.

We are now in an olive-grove. A local has just come along with a jar of red wine, probably grape. It is a bit tart, but there is no charge—just help yourself—so what more could anyone ask?

The nicest thing about this little place is the oranges. They are the thick-skinned type and are delicious. You can buy them at two for five drachmas (2½d) and sometimes cheaper. I have a dozen right here, and have had several since lunch.

May 2:

We are still on the move—three shifts yesterday—and have been here a week and never slept in the same spot twice. Pack up and away at ten minutes' notice—not that we have much to pack: overcoat, groundsheet, one blanket. Some have a change of clothing, but most not. I have, as I brought more away with me than most. It has been a bit of a load, but I did not like dumping it. I still have H—'s scarf, B—'s balaclava, and Mrs S—'s mittens. They take up room, and have hardly been worn, but I hated parting with them. Also, a little something for you and R— that I have carried since Egypt and never had a chance of posting as there has been no parcel mail sent out. But I am hoping to get them away soon now.

We are now camped in an olive-grove, the trees larger than usual, about the size of a big apple-tree, and planted in rows, about 10 yards either way. Underneath are grape plants, also in rows, 4 ft either way and about 10 ft from the base of the tree. The grapes are only about 3 ft high, the old plants 18 inches, and the new shoots up to 2 feet. They are cut back each year as soon as they have finished bearing. They are now all loaded with small clumps of fruit, and the locals are taking the tips out of the shoots. This is a very fertile place in the valleys between the

hills and ranges, which are stony, and practically bare.

There is a huge well about 3 chains away—our only water. It is about 20 ft across and has an endless chain and small buckets, like the old dredge at **New Plymouth. The water is very cool and rather nice.**

May 11:

We have had no mail yet, and no news. It is like being in a lost world here.... Eggs have been scarce lately; an old lady was demonstrating to us how they have to wait for the hens to lay. It was too funny! (Later)... our mail has arrived at last. I got 15 letters and 3 cables.... We had a wet night the one before last; it rained nearly all night and we were pretty well soaked. All you could do was curl up in your groundsheet and wait for the dawn. It broke fine, and at 7 a.m. the sun came out, so all turned out all right....

There was a lot of activity here last night— *he* was over nearly all night and dropped a lot of bombs, out at the harbour, I should think. The AA guns gave him a pretty hot reception and the searchlights were going. It was like a huge Guy Fawkes.

The defence sector allocated to the New Zealand Division (now under command of Brigadier Puttick) extended westward from **Canea to the **Maleme** airfield, a distance of ten miles. In depth this sector varied from a mile and a half to three miles, the space restricted by a valley to the rear which ran south-west from **Canea** and passed behind the village of **Galatas**. Fifth Brigade under Brigadier Hargest undertook the defence of the **Maleme** territory while the sector's second fortress area, centred on **Galatas**, became the responsibility of a new formation—10 Infantry Brigade under **Colonel Kippenberger**— which included Divisional Petrol Company. Fourth Brigade filled the role of Creforce Reserve.**

On 29 April, the day after its formation, NZASC Battalion had been disbanded and Petrol Company, now under command of Captain McDonagh, became attached for a time to 5 Brigade. By 4 May the NZASC was incorporated in yet another outfit known as **Oakes Force. By**

15 May Petrol Company was again shuffled and re-dealt (for the last time) as part of 10 Brigade's Composite Battalion, commanded by Major Lewis.⁵ The battalion also included groups from RMT, Supply Column, and 4 and 5 Field Regiments. Other units of 10 Brigade were 20 Battalion (operationally under control of the New Zealand Division, since it formed the Divisional Reserve), 6 and 8 Greek Regiments, and a New Zealand **Divisional Cavalry** detachment of three squadrons, used as infantry.

Tenth Brigade's task was to garrison the defences built on high ground in the **Galatas** area and to guard the approach to **Canea** from the west. It had the further responsibility of destroying any hostile troops which might land in the valley behind the Divisional sector. Tenth Brigade's right flank pivoted on the sea coast about a mile and a half west of 7 General Hospital, 1800 yards north of **Galatas**. From there the line swung south-west along **Ruin Ridge** through vineyards for a distance of about 2000 yards to **Wheat Hill**, a high feature which dominated the whole line about 1000 yards west of **Galatas**. Thence the defences continued south-east to **Pink Hill**, immediately south of the village.

Petrol Company occupied positions strung around the base of **Pink Hill**, in what **Kippenberger** has described as 'the most



COMPOSITE BATTALION, GALATAS, 20 MAY 1941

dangerous portion' of this southern end. B Section's front faced south to a prison in the valley, across five or six hundred yards of flat ground planted with olive trees. On its left was a road running from **Galatas** to the **Suda- Alikianou** road, making a junction close to the prison. Across this Prison- **Galatas** road, farther left, was **Cemetery Hill**, later occupied by Divisional Cavalry. Next to the B Section positions were those of C, D, A and HQ Sections in that order, making an arc which faced for the most part west and south-west, with its right extremity near the gully between **Pink Hill** and **Wheat Hill**.

The danger to these southern positions lay in the amount of level country, with plenty of good cover, which the Prison Valley afforded for the landing of German parachutists and other airborne troops. The valley was a 'natural' for the concentration of enemy forces intent on cutting off our troops in the **Maleme** area. That could be done by a strong thrust northward to the coast—a distance of only a mile or two—through **Galatas**. The valley could also be used by enemy troops for a direct attack on the **Canea- Suda** sector. In either case the Divisional Petrol positions would lie directly in the Germans' path and would need to be eliminated.

On B Section's front, less than half a mile away, was the prison itself. Its commanding position and square solid walls, impregnable to our own light arms, provided a ready-made bastion which should have been denied to the enemy. Yet no attempt was made to occupy it, probably through deference to the civilian authorities—a squeamishness not shared by the prison's commandant, who proved to be pro-German.

Two miles down the valley, near its western end (and theoretically 'commanding' it) were the **Divisional Cavalry**, now on foot of course, and **8 Greek Regiment**, holding isolated positions which would certainly be overwhelmed by any large-scale landing. **Divisional Cavalry** had orders to withdraw through **Galatas** if they could not hold out. The Greeks, numbering 900, were a 'scratch' formation of very recent vintage, armed with ancient Steyer rifles from which they had fired only ten rounds

apiece by way of musketry training. The Greek CO was ineffective and a New Zealander, Major Cliff **Wilson**,⁶ was their actual commander. Sixth Greek Regiment, 1400 strong but with only four weeks' service, occupied positions on high country south-east of **Galatas**. They were commanded by Colonel Gregarios, a staunch and loyal soldier; but none had yet fired a single round from his rifle. Each man carried only three rounds, and ammunition sent up to them the night before the attack remained for some reason undistributed.

In addition to these local considerations, the southern sector shared in the general defence weaknesses—lack of air support, no transport, poor communications, no heavy armament, and insufficient fighting men to defend strategic points. Nevertheless, Petrol Company made the best of the terrain allotted them. They occupied trenches—much too wide, as it turned out, when the mortars began lobbing, and only waist deep—previously dug by I **Welch Regiment**. With the help of our sappers (who taught Petrol Company how to make grenades out of empty milk-tins) they erected barbed wire in front of their positions. To block the important **Galatas** road, which ran alongside B Section's cookhouse and marked the flank of the Company's main positions, they had dragged up three big pine trees, felled in the face of voluble protests from their Cretan owner.

Living conditions in this sector were strange and primitive. Food was cooked in cut-down petrol tins, over open fires for which the men gathered logs from the fields, or tore off branches from nearby olive trees. Rations consisted of the inevitable bully, with sometimes a sparse issue of tinned carrots and potatoes, and very occasionally a tin of fruit. Fresh oranges were available, and sometimes eggs, though these were more often privately acquired by men who were willing to barter their small issue of cigarettes—woodbines at that time. There were daily patrols through the olive groves and the much-trampled fields of young wheat and barley. The crops provided bedding of a sort for an alfresco existence made tolerable only by the mildness of the climate and the season of the year—late spring. Still, the nights were very cold, and

downpours of rain often added to the general discomfort. Some men built themselves crude huts, Robinson Crusoe style, from twigs and branches.

While our troops were thus adapting themselves in one sector or another on **Crete**, the Hun had not been idle. He built new airfields in **Greece** and on the island of Melos. From these he launched attacks on **Maleme** and **Heraklion**, and on Allied ships carrying stores and reinforcements from Egypt. As in **Greece**, his numerical superiority enabled him quickly to knock out the **RAF**, and by 18 May our operational aircraft on the island had been reduced to four Hurricanes and three Gladiators. And since there was no hope of reinforcing them, these were flown back to Egypt next day. Allied shipping took a severe pounding, and by 19 May there were thirteen vessels lying sunk or damaged in **Suda Bay**. Under such conditions supplies of local labour for unloading cargoes soon faded out, so the New Zealanders formed their own dock parties and carried on.

Most ominous, however, for the defenders of **Crete** was the steady build-up in southern **Greece** of German airborne troops. Our Intelligence estimated these to number between 5000 and 6000, in addition to equally formidable forces preparing to invade by sea. The scale of air support for the expected invasion—thought to be due on 16 May—was reckoned at about 315 heavy bombers, 60 twin-engined fighters, 240 dive-bombers and 270 single-engined fighters. As it happened, the enemy assault did not develop, as expected, on 16 May, Jerry continuing to hold his hand and contenting himself with a solid air pounding of **Suda** on 19 May and a savage blitz against the defences of **Maleme** and **Heraklion**. On Tuesday, 20 May, the show really opened, shortly after sunrise on a bright, cloudless day. And from that time the ‘all clear’ was not heard again on **Crete**.

The attack found Petrol Company well prepared. Battle positions had been carefully sited, the procedure for manning them rehearsed. As the first enemy aircraft zoomed overhead, shedding parachutists and towing troop-laden gliders, men from the five sections moved to their defence posts without confusion or delay. Driver **Johnson**,⁷ of B Section, writes:

At the time of the invasion (approx 0800 hrs on 20th May) I was having a wash. My first thought on seeing a bomber coming over, towing seven gliders, was that the invasion had started in earnest. I went to my fire-position which was a two-man slit trench.

Then the troop-carrying planes came up the valley from the south and started dropping paratroops. As the range was roughly twelve hundred yards it was useless firing on them so we just sat tight and watched proceedings.

About a half-hour after dropping the first paratroopers the enemy had a mortar firing on our positions. I noticed a German on the top of **Cemetery Hill and as he was making signals by Very pistol I surmised that he was a spotter for their mortars.**

I tried a shot at him but had to fire four shots in all to get the range (700 yds). On the fifth shot I skittled him. He was replaced immediately by another. I got three spotters in all, then the spotters got a bit shrewd and either took cover or shifted post, as I did not see any more.

Driver **Bryant,⁸ on cookhouse fatigue after breakfast, first noticed a bomber flying very low. He says:**

Then the troop-carriers came, towing gliders that were uncoupled overhead. He next strafed all around our area, for about ten minutes to half an hour. I made for my action post, which was the last of B Section as it joined onto C Section area.

I stayed there picking them off as they advanced towards the barbed wire. Then I noticed four Jerries pulling at a white parachute; they were putting in a machine-gun. I opened fire, and got a lovely reply.

A sniper opened up, then a mortar. They were dropping all around my position. They finally got the machine-gun going and concentrated on me. Lieut McPhail was coming along in front of me when the sniper got him in the leg. About 20 minutes after that a mortar blew me out of

my trench.

While this was going on in B Section's area, a machine-gun outpost under Corporal Trevelyan, forward of the wire about midway between the prison and the village of Galatas, came in for a hot time. This detachment comprised Drivers Baldwin,⁹ J. S. Plumtree,¹⁰ Holland,¹¹ Lawton,¹² Eckersley,¹³ Peel-Walker,¹⁴ C. Neilson¹⁵ and Piper.¹⁶ Their report follows:

At approximately 0800 hrs on the 20th May, 1941, a party of nine of us were holding an anti-tank rifle and bren-gun position some 300 yds back from the jail in front of the Greek lines when we were forced to take cover on account of large numbers of enemy aircraft which were concentrating on the area surrounding the jail. They were flying very low and machine-gunning the area.

Following closely were gliders and numerous troop-carrying planes from which parachute troops descended in large numbers and we most certainly accounted for many with our rifles. They landed on three sides of our position and within fifteen minutes were throwing hand grenades at our slit trench. We soon realised that it was useless to remain in this position and decided to retire to our own unit some 300 yds to the rear.

If it had not been for the covering fire of Dvr Eckersley's bren-gun I am afraid very few if any of us would have come out alive. After reporting to Sgt Hopley we took up positions with our own B Section.

At the first opportunity we checked up on our party and found that Dvr D. Piper was missing and we fear that he was killed during our retirement as he has not been seen since. Another member, Dvr W. Holland, was severely wounded on arrival back at B Section area.

For approximately six hours the hill was subject to heavy mortar and machine-gun fire, during which time many casualties¹⁷ were inflicted on our section. Among these were, *Killed*: Capt McDonagh, Sgt Hopley, Dvrs E. T. H. Toner, G. Parnell, E. Isherwood; *Wounded*: Lieut McPhail, 2/Lieut Jackson, Sgt McNae, L/Cpl R. Orr, Dvrs W. Dunn, W.

Smithson, B. Standen.

At approximately 1600 hrs we received the order from CSM James to retire to C Section area as our own area was considered untenable. We retired under heavy machine-gun and mortar fire carrying our wounded with us down to the RAP.

Corporal Trevelyan's group had come under fire from HQ and 9 Company of III Battalion, 3 Parachute Regiment, led by the battalion's CO, Major Heilmann. German records reveal that this group had landed by mistake south-east of Galatas instead of east of it; and only by determined action in which their grenades and machine pistols came into use were they able to dislodge the Petrol Company detachment and gain a footing on Cemetery Hill. The regiment's commander, Colonel Heidrich, had himself landed with a signals group near the prison about 9 a.m., and from there he directed the attack on Petrol Company's Pink Hill positions, sending in 5 and 12 Companies and probably part of 9 Company.

A German CSM wrote of this attack:

In the afternoon between 1400 and 1500 hours we advanced to attack the hill of Galatos (Pink Hill). We proceeded, without opposition, about halfway up the hill. Suddenly we ran into heavy and very accurate rifle and machine-gun fire. The enemy had held their fire with great discipline and had allowed us to approach well within effective range before opening up. Our casualties were extremely heavy and we were forced to retire leaving many dead behind us.... This first attack on Galatos had cost us approximately 50 per cent casualties, about half of whom were killed.

Events in C Section on this first day of the attack followed much the same pattern as in B Section. Parachutists concentrating in the area during the morning's 'first flurry' were met by a disciplined and devastating fire which forced them to withdraw, leaving many dead. In this encounter Driver Stanger, ¹⁸ on the Bren gun, did notable work,

followed by similar execution, later on, with a Spandau that he brought in after a lone-wolf prowl by night. As the morning advanced a heavy mortar got C Section's range, causing many casualties. Sergeant Taaffe was wounded, and the two corporals, N. M. Stewart¹⁹ and J. K. Bailic,²⁰ took over, handling the section very ably.

Casualties, mainly from mortar fire from Cemetery Hill (where the Germans had succeeded in dislodging the Greeks and establishing themselves) and from rifles and machine guns in the prison area, were growing now in B Section. Captain McDonagh, directing operations there, was mortally wounded. This was a severe loss. A fearless and inspiring commander, McDonagh had been moving among his sections, cheering the men with such pleasantries as 'The duck season's opened a bit late boys, but there's good shooting now', and taking photographs of the descending parachutists. Lieutenant Macphail took over, but he too was soon badly wounded. Second-Lieutenant Jackson then assumed command, until he in his turn was hit, first in the hand, then in the head. Driver R. H. Johnson supplies the following account:

B Section were entrenched on the right of Galatos facing the prison when the invasion commenced. At approximately 1200 hrs on the 20th of May 2/Lieut Jackson was making his way back to the R.A.P. with a shattered wrist. As he passed my trench which was in an exposed position he fell, and as he fell, a German sniper, who had been causing considerable damage, opened fire on him; although the bullets did not make a direct hit, being of an explosive nature, the shrapnel from same hit Mr Jackson about the right eye and temple. I managed to drag the Lieut to the comparative safety of my trench, where I bandaged his wounds and applied a tourniquet. I was not able to get Mr Jackson back to the R.A.P. for some time as the enemy sniper wasn't a new chum with a rifle, and any movement on my part was greeted with a stream of exploding bullets. At approximately 1530 hrs, with the aid of Dvr Gradon,²¹ Dvr Kinnuman²² and Dvr Hatchard we were able to get Mr Jackson out of my trench and on the way back to the R.A.P. I kept up a rapid fire on where I had reason to believe the sniper was, and managed

to draw his fire till they were out of his range.

Previous to this at about 1400 hrs we had been told to retire to C Section's lines.

Shortly the enemy fire slackened off enough to warrant a dash for it. Dvr Gradon and myself dashed up the hill behind our position on the top of the hill. Amongst some cactus plants we found four of our section wounded. Dvr Gradon and I managed to assist one man over the hill to safety and told the others we would send help. We got to a dressing station where I inquired after Mr Jackson and his assistants, to be told that they had not yet arrived. I retraced our tracks till I found them and we brought Mr Jackson to the dressing station, where we acquired a stretcher and conveyed him to the R.A.P.

From the R.A.P. I went to the 7th General Hospital as Rifleman on the truck taking the wounded. At the hospital I assisted in the amputation of Mr Jackson's hand. The amputation was done by Major **Christie**.²³

I helped with the patients all the next day as the hospital orderlies had been taken prisoner by the enemy.

I then tried to rejoin my unit but was unable to do so on account of enemy action, so was told by an officer of the 18th Rifle Batt that I might stay with them until they shifted up to the front, which they did that night.

Petrol Company was now without officers in the **Galatas** sector,²⁴ so CSM James took control of the Company and directed operations with outstanding ability. His right-hand man was Sergeant Hopley of B Section, whose conduct, until he too was killed, has been described as 'particularly cool and daring'. When B Section's machine-gun detachment was surrounded by paratroopers early on 20 May, Hopley had asked permission to go to their aid, but was refused. Again, when it was found that in the excitement of the first German landings, the road block near the cookhouse had not been placed in position, Second-

Lieutenant Macphail and Sergeant Hopley rectified this, despite the attentions of low-flying and machine-gunning aircraft.

While B and C Sections were taking the brunt of the enemy's first onslaught, D Section (Workshops) on the other flank had a fairly quiet morning. Under Sergeant-Major C. Chetwin, Staff-Sergeant Williams and Sergeants **Stephens ²⁵ and **Church**, ²⁶ they held prepared positions at the base of **Wheat Hill**, overlooking the prison. To their front was a wood, with barbed wire strung across the tree trunks. Driver **Watkins** ²⁷ recalls that on the morning of 20 May stand-to was concluded in the usual manner on a perfectly fine day with very little wind. After breakfast enemy air activity became very pronounced, but no paratroops landed within range. Minor shooting exchanges occurred between D Section and scattered parties of Germans, who apparently retired on finding the position wired and well defended. Watkins continues:**

There occurred no further enemy aggression until 1515 hrs, when under cover of a mortar barrage on this sector, the enemy advanced to within 200 yards of our forward posts, screened by natural cover which made his progress difficult to detect until the attack developed to a large-scale assault on our hill, which possessed many strategic advantages, preventing enemy advance on Galatos and commanding both the right and left flanks of his movement on the lower levels.

D Section area therefore developed into an area of concentrated enemy fire from mortar, automatic and light weapons, met by a heavy return fire from our own men with rifle and Bren. Dvrs O. G. **Jones ²⁸ and **Barker** ²⁹ (on the bren-gun)discouraged further enemy advance through the wire defences at the foot of the hill, while rifle fire picked off enemy targets as they appeared. When it became apparent that the enemy's mortar fire was becoming too heavy, and severe casualties were being inflicted on our men, it was decided by the section sergeants to evacuate the position to rear defences, at 1700 hrs.**

Following this retirement, which Staff-Sergeant Williams directed, though wounded, D Section survivors were distributed among the other

sections, while all sections from then on became 'mixed-up'. During the retirement, Driver Watkins adds, Driver W. A. Mackinder still held his forward position, under fire from the enemy's machine guns and mortars, and took toll with his rifle. He held his position until mortally wounded.

A Section took post under Second-Lieutenant **Almao**³⁰ of 5 Field Regiment alongside D Section at the foot of **Wheat Hill**. This detachment was to act as a reserve, and to protect an observation post higher up. Corporal **Putt**³¹ commanded one A sub-section which occupied a trench on **Wheat Hill** from 20 to 24 May, and took only a small part in the general action. At each end of this trench was a Vickers machine gun. Putt says he left the trench only three times during those five days, and remarks that no provision seems to have been made for food and water to reach the group; and had it not been for the initiative shown by Lance-Corporal R. Bickers and Driver **Bloomfield**³² in procuring supplies and providing hot tea once a day, Putt's sub-section, he says, would have had a pretty lean time.

At dusk on 20 May CSM James, then still in effective command of Petrol Company, ordered its withdrawal for reorganisation from **Pink Hill** to the line of a sunken road (or irrigation trench) in the rear. Concerning this withdrawal Corporal A. T. Rimmer of HQ Section reports:

B and C Sections were compelled to retire from their positions on the hill during the afternoon after having suffered fairly heavy casualties and they took up positions with HQ Section. D Section were still in their positions on the right flank, but during the late afternoon, owing to heavy and accurate mortar fire they also were forced to retire. At the conclusion of the day, the position showed that our line had been withdrawn a short distance. We had suffered fairly heavy casualties, but from information gathered we had been able to inflict heavy casualties on the enemy troops.

Headquarters' sergeant at that time was W. F. Browne. His section was very 'thin on the ground'. One HQ corporal (**Jim Ottaway**³³), in the

vicinity of the cookhouse when the attack opened, tried to rejoin his section but was unable to do so immediately, so he joined A Section at the foot of Wheat Hill.

B Section retired over the top of **Pink Hill**, which had little cover and was exposed to both the view and the fire of the enemy. A covering party of fourteen men had been posted there, mainly to protect the withdrawal of the wounded. Driver Johnson records:

As the enemy's mortar-fire was getting too close to be comfortable, Dvr Gradon and I dashed into the adjoining trench, which was being held by Cpl Trevelyan, Cpl **Reefman**,³⁴ and Dvr Sergeant³⁵ and a Greek soldier. From there we made a dash up the hill behind our lines. At the top of the hill we found several of our section wounded. We started across the flat top of the hill; Cpl Trevelyan had joined us and was helping a man across the top. There was a lot of bullets flying around, but by crawling along on our stomachs we safely crossed and scrambled into a slit trench.

By this time the Greek troops across the road on Petrol Company's left flank had withdrawn and were replaced by **Divisional Cavalry**. Some twenty Greeks still manning a Maxim gun when Petrol Company retired were found next morning all dead. **Divisional Cavalry's** exposed position farther down the valley had proved untenable, and led by Major **Russell**³⁶ they had worked their way round through the hills into **Galatas**, after some unpleasant moments in the approach to front-line positions held by the Composite Battalion. During the night CSM James effected his reorganisation of Petrol Company then handed over to Captain **Rowe**,³⁷ 10 Brigade's Supply Officer, who had been sent by **Colonel Kippenberger** to take command. The CSM, not having met this officer previously, regarded him with some reserve; but he found Captain Rowe to be 'one of the best' and soon had complete confidence in him. This confidence seems to have been mutual, for Rowe left James to carry out most of the detailed work of running the Company while he himself attended to the general dispositions, and to effecting liaison with 10 Brigade Headquarters, **Divisional Cavalry**, and other neighbouring units. During

the night, parties from Divisional Petrol and **Divisional Cavalry** made sorties into **Galatas** village and cleared out German troops who had gained positions there.

This was an anxious day for 10 Brigade's commanding officer, and he found good cause to praise the steadfastness of "the sturdy Petrol Company".³⁸ His main concern was the weakness of his left flank where, after the first German attack in the morning, most of **6 Greek Regiment** had withdrawn, leaving gaps between Petrol Company and 19 Battalion east of **Galatas**. 'It was fortunate', writes D. M. Davin in his official history of the **Crete** campaign, 'that the enemy pitted his main attack against Petrol Company.' In an effort to bridge the gap, Captain **Bassett**,³⁹ Brigade Major of 10 Brigade, worked his way across to the right-hand positions of 19 Battalion, and while doing so, saw a young British officer, Captain Michael Forrester, rally a party of Greeks in a weird counter-attack.

'Suddenly Forrester began tootling a tin whistle like the Pied Piper', Bassett wrote, 'and the whole motley crowd of them surged down against the Huns yelling and shouting in a mad bayonet charge which made the Jerries break and run. This steadied what Greeks were left and we stretched a thin line of outposts across which I patrolled three times that day.'

Anxiety, both on account of the weak left flank and the fate of **Divisional Cavalry** (concerning which **Colonel Kippenberger** had heard nothing) ended at about four in the afternoon when Major Russell brought in his cavalry detachment and occupied the weak left sector between **Pink Hill** and **Cemetery Hill**. Thus the enemy's chance for a break-through was gone.

More than once during the day **Kippenberger** asked Divisional Headquarters for infantry support to launch a counter-attack in the prison area, from which the main thrusts were coming and where it was reported that the Germans were preparing a landing ground. The Composite Battalion, though holding their line stoutly, were wholly

untrained for such a manoeuvre and were not armed for it. Petrol Company, for example, had no bayonets and were five rifles short of their numerical strength. Their only other weapons were two Brens, one Lewis gun and an anti-tank rifle. They themselves were mostly drivers and technicians, with no previous experience of infantry fighting.

Late in the afternoon two companies came over from 19 Battalion, and three light tanks of the 3rd Hussars, commanded by the intrepid Lieutenant Roy Farran. Two of his tanks went down the road from Galatas towards the prison and returned fairly soon, after shooting a few Germans. Zero hour for the infantry attack was set at 8.30, but the two companies seemed rather vague concerning their objective. They were withdrawn by 10 Brigade before daylight after having inflicted only minor casualties. Meanwhile the retirement of Petrol Company allowed Heidrich's forces to gain a footing on Pink Hill and, had they held out there, things would have looked very sticky for 10 Brigade. But for some unknown reason (perhaps because of the arrival of the tanks and the infantry from 19 Battalion) the enemy withdrew from the hill. Next day Petrol Company returned to their original positions, and the battle for Galatas and the heights that commanded it began over again.

While every man in Petrol Company acquitted himself well on 20 May, a number were outstanding in their coolness under fire and their willingness to undertake hazardous tasks. Some have already been mentioned. Eckersley, for example, who continued firing his Bren gun single-handed, though surrounded, to cover the withdrawal of his detachment, and then himself escaped with his weapon. For this and other exploits, which took a heavy toll in German lives, Eckersley was awarded the Military Medal. The same decoration went to Driver E. B. ('Skin') Thompson who, Captain Rowe records, showed outstanding bravery in maintaining contact between Brigade Headquarters, the various sections of Petrol Company, and other neighbouring units. At one stage Thompson carried messages to 6 Greek Regiment—a particularly dangerous mission, since besides running the gauntlet of enemy fire, he risked being shot by the Greeks themselves. On a similar

errand later, Thompson was wounded and taken prisoner. Driver **Payne**,⁴⁰ the Company Headquarters runner, proved equally zealous and intrepid. G. C. Stephens, as Orderly Sergeant, showed great tact and courage in keeping continuous contact with all Petrol Company sections, even under the heaviest fire; while CSM James's outstanding leadership while acting as company commander has been noted.

When Petrol Company reoccupied the forward positions at dawn on 21 May a strip of 'no-man's land' was left on their eastern flank. This strip extended from the Prison road to the summit of **Pink Hill**, an area offering little cover and continually raked by enemy mortars. Much of the fire came from **Cemetery Hill**, across the road, where the Germans had established themselves and were able to enfilade the positions of both Petrol Company and **Divisional Cavalry**. Later in the day a squadron of the Cavalry and an infantry company attacked **Cemetery Hill** and drove the Germans off, capturing several mortars and machine guns and inflicting severe casualties. But since **Cemetery Hill**, like **Pink Hill**, offered little cover, and our troops had no tools to dig in with, they also withdrew, reporting the hill to be untenable. Both sides seemed to agree on this; so **Cemetery Hill** also became no-man's land.

Apart from continual mortaring, with attacks—and the threat of them—from enemy aircraft, the day passed fairly quietly. Sergeant-Major Chetwin took over HQ Section, supervising operations in the Company's reorganised line, while CSM James accompanied Captain Rowe on reconnaissance and liaison work. With so many casualties on the previous day among officers and sergeants, added responsibility for leadership fell to the corporals, who ably commanded the groups allotted them. Among these, **Thwaites**,⁴¹ Stewart, Ottaway, **Hurdley**,⁴² Bailie and Ginders were prominent. Casualties that day included a machine-gun team comprising Drivers A. N. **Norton**,⁴³ who later died of his wounds, and Colin **Standen**,⁴⁴ killed. Colin was one of five Standen brothers who served with the **2 NZEF**, three of them in Petrol Company. Two lost their lives on **Crete**.

During the morning, after arranging with Major Russell that Petrol

Company and **Divisional Cavalry** would each cover one side of **Pink Hill**, Captain Rowe asked **Colonel Kippenberger** to inspect the Company's line. This he did, in company with the Brigade Major. Rowe pointed out that Petrol Company, with about 130 men, was holding a front of over 1000 yards, and asked for reinforcements. But it was decided, in view of the general shortage, to continue with the same strength (later increased by Divisional Petrol personnel returning from various duties, e.g., at 7 General Hospital and Brigade Headquarters) and only to call for reinforcements in time of stress.

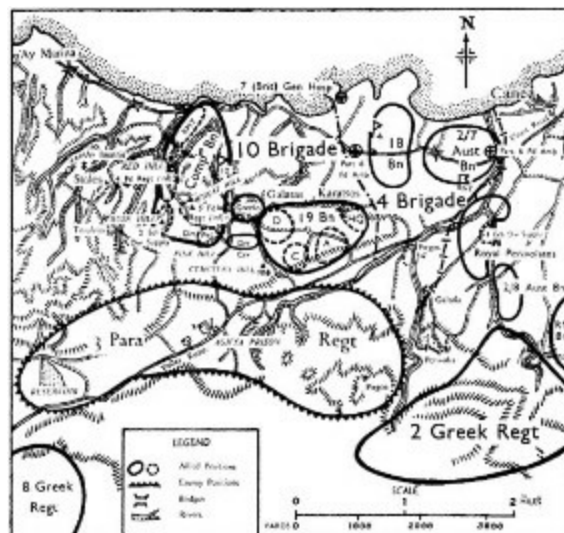
For both sides 21 May was a very busy day, and in terms of the fate of **Crete**, a crucial one. General Student, directing the German operations from **Greece**, had seen his plans go awry the previous day, especially in the **Galatas** sector. But he had made some gains near **Maleme**, where 22 Battalion was forced to withdraw. Nevertheless he expected a strong counter-attack there, and was not too hopeful about his chances of with- standing it. In the Prison area Colonel Heidrich, commanding *3 Parachute Regiment*, also expected strong counter-measures, which would have put his force completely 'in the cart'. The determined stand by Petrol Company and other units on the first day had foiled his moves for the speedy capture of **Galatas**; the ground he held was not easily defensible, a large number of his men were killed, and he now had hundreds of wounded on his hands.

His remaining troops were losing their zest, and CSM Neuhoff, already quoted, expressed his feelings in this way:

It was particularly noticeable that a very large proportion of our casualties had been shot in the head. This fact and the controlled fire and discipline of the enemy led us to believe that we were up against a specialist force of picked snipers, of whose strength we had no accurate idea but which we judged to be far greater than ours ... we were expecting the enemy to counter-attack.... We had suffered heavy casualties and had encountered opposition far greater than anticipated or ever before experienced. Our Commanding Officer wished to retire to

a better defensive position in hilly wooded country to the south-west of the prison.... It was eventually decided to remain in our original positions and we were greatly relieved when the expected counter-attack did not eventuate.

In 10 Brigade, by contrast, morale was still high; but our men were not equal to the task of counter-attack, and by the time **Divisional Headquarters** was able to mount one, the opportunity for it had gone. In the **Maleme** sector, likewise, various factors hindered a swift and all-out onslaught against the enemy to drive him from the airfield and so prevent German reinforcements from landing there. One factor was an expected invasion by seaborne forces, to deal with which several of our all-too-few battalions had to be kept in hand. As it happened, the **Royal Navy** took care of this sea invasion, effectively thwarting on the night of 21-22 May a German force of several thousand men, together with tanks, transport, supplies and heavy armament. The boats were scattered and turned back. Nevertheless, General Student, reinforcing success, threw in his reserves at **Maleme**. Our counter-attack there failed; and from that moment (as Student declared at his trial, years later) **Crete** was won for **Germany**.



CANEA-GALATAS SECTOR, 22 MAY, 1941

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Ironically enough, Petrol Company and others of the Composite Battalion, watching the never-ending stream of German troop-carriers

flying towards **Maleme**, were greatly cheered. They thought the Hun was evacuating. The idea of a defeat just didn't occur to them. But early in the morning of 22 May **Colonel Kippenberger** heard that things had not been going well for us at **Maleme**. 'Nevertheless', he writes, 'it was decided to go ahead with my plans. 19 Battalion attacked with two companies on a front of 800 yards, with the object of regaining most of the ground from which the Greeks had been driven. Meagre support was given by our three Italian 75's and a couple of mortars. There was considerable opposition, enemy aircraft intervened with some effect and, after three hours of rather desultory scrapping in very broken ground, both companies withdrew with a dozen casualties, having captured a mortar and three heavy machine-guns. The day closed with a heavy attack in the evening on the old line up the Prison road. This was fiercely pressed on a front of some 700 yards, and after losing about fifty men the rather weary Petrol Company fell back, though still fighting.'

In point of fact, Petrol Company gave no ground at all on 22 May, and **Colonel Kippenberger** was no doubt misled by a false report to Brigade Headquarters stating that the Company was being driven out of **Galatas**—a report which caused Captain Rowe to send to Brigade the following terse message: 'Div Pet are, and will remain, in their original positions'.

Not only were they in them, but they were dug in. A few picks and shovels had somehow come to light on 22 May, and our men took advantage of a rather quiet morning to get below ground. Their original trenches, dug by the **Welch Regiment**, had proved too wide for protection against mortar bursts and were too shallow to provide riflemen with adequate cover. Earlier, it seems, there had been one pick and one shovel for the whole Company, but these had been needed for burials. During the temporary withdrawal on the night of 20-21 May Drivers Baldwin and Thompson had carved themselves a dugout, using a tin-hat and a short Italian bayonet.

In the afternoon of 22 May reports reached Captain Rowe of enemy

troop movements at the crossroads near the prison. He and CSM James decided to investigate. They went some distance forward of the wire in front of Company Headquarters' positions, where they were seen and machine-gunned by three fighter planes. Simultaneously, **Galatas** and the Petrol Company's lines were attacked from the air—all this being preliminary to a German infantry advance up the **Galatas** road, and up the 'dead' area on **Pink Hill**. The Hun was obviously intent on working into **Galatas** via the Divisional Petrol positions.

Rowe and James were cut off for a time, and when they got back events were moving briskly. One determined enemy thrust pierced the Company's line; but Corporal N. M. Stewart, who had been in reserve with about thirty men of the night-watching patrols, rushed into the breach and drove the Germans back about 100 yards. For this he was awarded the Military Medal. Some Germans succeeded in getting to the top of **Pink Hill**; and as they could thus outflank Petrol Company's positions, Rowe sent for immediate reinforcements and ordered a concentrated fire on **Pink Hill**. 'Everything we had went off', he writes, 'and soon the Greeks arrived. I asked them to clear the Hill, but in view of our few numbers I refused to allow Div Pet to participate.'

Nonetheless, many of the Company did participate. Sergeant Stephens, in Company Headquarters' area, could see the Germans out in front from time to time, and Corporal Stubbs, who was alongside him, potted one. 'The Greeks were back in the left rear in reserve under Capt Forrester and also a Greek Major with red tabs such as our Colonels (and above) wear', Captain Rowe reported. 'The Greeks moved through Div Pet to the front. HQ Section was only a few yards from a clearing, and in front of the line was a patch of open land with grass, grape-vines and some bushes. The Germans were among the vines and bushes. At about 5 p.m. the Greeks charged into them, with yelling which was led by the Greek major—his voice could be heard above all the noise of battle.'

Also into the fray rushed the women and children of **Galatas**, brandishing knives, reap-hooks and such-like primitive weapons, and leaping and screaming like wild animals. Men from Petrol Company

followed, in a bayonet charge without bayonets. The enemy turned and fled. Sergeant Stephens affirms that although Captain Rowe forbade them to take part, most of Petrol Company around him did so, including Corporal Stubbs. Later, as a prisoner of war, Stephens spoke to the Germans about this weird counter-attack and they told him that when the children from the village joined in, it took the heart out of them. They could not fire at the children, so they bolted. It no doubt came as a shock to the Germans to find themselves so hated by the civilian population. They had assumed all along that the Cretans would be sympathetic towards them, and ready to balk the efforts of the island's defenders.

Just before the attack on HQ Section area a Petrol Company group in the valley between **Wheat Hill** and **Pink Hill** took a pounding from the general air blitz, then found themselves attacked by ground forces. Driver Baldwin relates:

L-Cpl **Hearn**,⁴⁵ a quiet unassuming sort of chap, stood up and called out, 'Let's charge the bastards, boys!' With rifles only—no bayonets—we charged. **Ruback**⁴⁶ and **Depper**⁴⁷ were hit. We then heard a voice, authoritative and in perfect English, call out, 'ASC cease fire!' We had lost our original officers and did not recognise the voice, but it took the kick out of the charge. Things looked a bit grim for a time. Then we heard the Greeks and civilians making a terrific racket up nearer Galatos. They had been out collecting arms from dead Jerries that day, and earlier I saw one Greek in a pleated skirt with eight or nine rifles.

This charge, coming from a fresh quarter, 'threw' the Germans, so we took fresh heart and charged again, firing as we ran. The Germans retreated, and we chased them through the olive trees. I did not count the dead myself, but there must have been about twenty on our front. Pet Coy captured five Spandau machine-guns with ammunition and two trench mortars without ammunition.

The authoritative voice speaking 'perfect English' was no doubt that of **Colonel Kippenberger** who, with Lieutenant **Carson**⁴⁸ and a small

reserve force of **4 RMT** men, had moved quickly round to **Wheat Hill** with the idea of counter-attacking the enemy on his left flank. The Colonel was waiting for Carson's men to line up before giving him the order to charge, when 'a most infernal uproar broke out across the valley'—coming of course from the Greeks and Cretans. One other conspicuous effort in the day's activities was that of Petrol Company's Driver Peel-Walker, who on 20 May had fought his way to safety with Corporal Trevelyan's hard-pressed MG detachment. Firing a captured Spandau on the Company's right flank, Peel-Walker accounted for two of the three enemy machine guns concentrated there. He used tracer to attract the Germans' fire, and then calmly shot them up. This and other exploits gained him the Military Medal.

That day the Company came under command of Major Russell, his **Divisional Cavalry** detachment and our company thus making a single tactical formation (**Russell Force**) to cover both sides of the vital **Prison-Galatas** road.

Petrol Company's mood that evening is summed up by Corporal Rimmer: 'We were tired but exhilarated by our success. Our casualties had been light, and we felt we had justified ourselves as infantrymen. Naturally we could not perform to the same extent as experienced and trained infanteers, but our lack of experience and weapons did not damp the fighting qualities of our men.'

When the Company became part of **Russell Force** changes were made in the disposition of the remaining elements of the Composite Battalion. By now the battalion had had 190 casualties. It was showing signs of exhaustion. On 23 May a relief was arranged and 18 Battalion took over the positions on Petrol Company's right flank from **Wheat Hill** to the sea. A platoon from 4 Field Regiment, under Lieutenant **Dill**, ⁴⁹ was moved up to hold the crest of **Pink Hill**.

The pasting taken by 5 Brigade in the **Maleme** area also had its effect upon the fortunes of Petrol Company. Far from the enemy withdrawing in that sector, at least 12,000 additional troops were landed

there on 22 May, the enemy also landing light tanks, Bren carriers, field and mountain guns, motor-cycles, machine guns and mortars of various calibres. This extra weight of men and material eventually forced 5 Brigade back into the Divisional Reserve area, giving the enemy in the **Maleme** sector substantial control of the coast road, and thus facilitating the meeting-up of his 'West' Force with Heidrich's troops in the prison area. Together they could bring a crushing weight to bear upon 18 Battalion, Petrol Company, 4 Field Regiment and other New Zealand units barring the way to **Canea**.

That this was their firm intention became abundantly clear on 23 and 24 May. Enemy patrols from the prison area were very active against **Russell Force** on both sides of the **Galatas** road. Farther north, parties of the Composite Battalion, working south of the coast road to cover the withdrawal of 5 Brigade, reported several brushes with the Germans. Both enemy groups were extending 'feeler' patrols towards each other. On 24 May, with 5 Brigade now out of the line, 18 Battalion, holding the whole front from **Galatas** to the sea, was heavily mortared. The entire **Galatas** area came in for much ground strafing from planes at tree-top level. That day Second-Lieutenant Collins and Sergeant Jim Greig, who had been with the Petrol Company picket group in **Canea**, made their way back to the Company. ⁵⁰

On 25 May, Petrol Company's sixth consecutive day of fighting, the enemy began his expected heavy push against the whole **Galatas** line. He had spent the previous night getting his artillery, mortars and machine guns into position, ample cover being available in the numerous gullies and olive groves, and on the reverse sides of hills. During the morning strong parties of enemy infantry took up positions under cover opposite 18 Battalion, and one column 1500 strong was observed about noon moving forward in threes, ready to deploy. From that time mortaring and air attacks along the whole line became intense.

The attack opened at 2 p.m. with the usual stiff thrust against Petrol Company, the enemy having a fixed idea that his best way into **Galatas** was via our Company's lines—a costly notion for him, but one which no

amount of punishment seemed able to dispel. Petrol Company, for their part, had an equally fixed idea that Jerry *wasn't* going that way. Helped by enfilade fire from **Divisional Cavalry**, the Company stood fast and held up enemy progress in the **Pink Hill** area. Divisional Cavalry also came under hot ground fire, and as the battle progressed Major Russell had difficulty in keeping touch with his force. Telephone lines were cut, and communication had to be made by runner. Soon the various elements of Russell Force, including two infantry platoons from 19 Battalion sent up as reinforcements, were acting more or less independently.

By the middle of the afternoon the whole **Galatas** line was under very severe pressure. Eighteenth Battalion, on Petrol Company's right flank, came in for a mauling. Its D Company near the sea was quickly overrun, and despite gallant counter-attacks, that flank was turned. Simultaneously the enemy lunged hard against A Company, then holding **Wheat Hill** immediately to the right of Petrol Company. Jerry's plan, no doubt, was to encircle the centre of the 18 Battalion front, then held by C Company. The extreme pressure on A Company (right alongside Petrol Company) caused it, too, to withdraw, after holding out gallantly and sustaining heavy casualties; and so, to avoid encirclement, C Company also withdrew.

This left **Russell Force** in a most perilous position, not helped by the fact that Captain Rowe and CSM James were in the dark about what was actually happening on their right. Captain Rowe reports: 'I had no indication that there was going to be a withdrawal, but as the afternoon progressed, more and heavier fire came from our right flank and on several occasions I tried to contact **18th Battalion** and at one stage sent a Sgt and runner to definitely find out what had happened. Late in the afternoon I received a call from Major Russell to say that he was hard pressed and must withdraw but would try and hold out until we came through. He said that the 18th Battalion had been withdrawn some hours before. This was my first definite advice of a withdrawal on this flank.'

'Skin' Thompson, again running the gauntlet from Petrol Company lines to [Divisional Cavalry](#), managed to contact Major Russell, whom he found with a bandage round his head directing operations from a slit trench. From there Thompson was sent with a message to 18 Battalion's headquarters on Red Hill. He arrived in time to catch a heavy dive-bombing attack by massed Stukas, and to join in the subsequent retirement of 18 Battalion. Almost immediately he was hit by a machine-gun bullet in the right arm, closely followed by a mortar burst which wounded him in the rump, neck and leg. Dazed, but still mobile, Thompson 'ran like Hell', he says, uphill instead of down. An infantry S/M slapped a couple of field dressings on him then directed him downhill to the RAP.

At this stage there were nearly 200 wounded at the RAP, with two trucks working non-stop, taking men down to the ADS in loads. The wounded were sorted under a culvert on the road and the really bad cases taken into a farmhouse, then being used as a kind of field hospital by two or three untiring MOs. Thompson was directed to a stable along with ten or twelve of the less seriously wounded. There he found Driver [Crocker](#) ⁵¹ of Petrol Company (wounded in the leg) who had been sent out to find him that afternoon when he failed to return to the Company lines.

A runner from 18 Battalion trying to reach Petrol Company to warn them of the Battalion's withdrawal was also shot up. He was found later on by Lieutenant Carson and his RMT patrol which had come forward to help stiffen the line. 'Hardly had it arrived when there was an attack by thirty Stukas which weakened the right flank badly. Into the gap Lieutenant Carson took his patrol and the whole force stayed grimly put against attacks of increasing intensity. Even after 18 Battalion had withdrawn they stayed on, the runner sent to warn them of the retirement having been killed on the way.

'The consequence of 18 Battalion's withdrawal was that the Petrol Company was now coming under heavy fire from the right as well as the

front. But Captain Rowe and his men battled stoutly on in defence of their positions until a message came by telephone—this line must have been one of the few that remained uncut—from Major Russell to the effect that 18 Battalion had withdrawn and that he himself was so hard pressed that he would have to withdraw also; but he would try to hold on for a time so that the Petrol Company could withdraw first.’⁵²

Shortly afterwards **Divisional Cavalry** retired towards Karatsos and the 19 Battalion positions. About the same time Captain Rowe sent a message along Petrol Company's line to its right flank asking them to send runners to collect any food and ammunition possible, and saying that in a quarter of an hour the Company would retire in extended line, using the flank on **Pink Hill** as a pivot. They would thus form a new line in front of **Galatas** facing **Wheat Hill**. Rowe hoped in this way to contact troops who had been between **Galatas** and **Ruin Hill** in the morning. Those troops, however, had also been withdrawn, so Petrol Company was ordered to continue its retirement through **Galatas** with the idea of linking up with 19 Battalion behind the village.

The whole operation was a hazardous one exposing the remnants of the company to enemy view and fire. Concerning it CSM James says: ‘Passing through the southern outskirts we discovered Div Cav was being fiercely attacked and we carried out some of their wounded. Pet Coy had very heavy casualties. These seemed to come from box barrages laid by mortars sited on **Ruin Hill** which overlooked the whole area.’

Captain Rowe relates:

Sgt Greig, CSM James and I were the last of our unit out of Galatos and found some wounded at the Exchange. We had them carried back and Sgt Greig, myself and CSM James were leaving Galatos in that order when three mortar bombs landed alongside us. Sgt Greig was hit in the head and although it was later turned to concussion he was able to walk at this stage: CSM James was hit on the legs, I was untouched. We called back some of the others and carried CSM James out on a blanket until we reached the **19 Bn RAP**. Greig was then delirious, and leaving

him and James I found Major Russell.

Out on the far flank of this pivoting movement, Sergeant Stephens noted that many men were picked off by the enemy as they moved through the groves in extended order. He and some others struck a sunken road and made their way along it into **Galatas**. Through **Galatas** they ran into an officer who, Stephens says, was brandishing a revolver and 'was about to counter-attack Galatos'. Stephens prepared to join up with him, but an MO called out, 'I want you four men'; so he and three others went to carry back some wounded. They carried a number to a waiting truck on the eastern outskirts of **Galatas**. Then at dusk Stephens and the other three set out to find Divisional Petrol Company or Captain Rowe. The counter-attack on **Galatas**—the most dramatic episode in the whole **Crete** campaign—was shared by a number from Petrol Company, and is described further on.

Corporal Rimmer, of Headquarters Section, notes that during this retirement enemy mortar fire was concentrated on Petrol Company, and snipers were very active. The *Luftwaffe* also harassed persistently and the withdrawal, Rimmer found, became so difficult that after getting through the village it was a matter of every man following the line of best cover and moving as quickly as possible. Consequently the Company became separated and most of them attached themselves to other units in the area. This came about through approaching darkness, and the fact that the men were obliged to disperse widely as they retired. Next day Captain Rowe endeavoured to find his Company and get the men together again, but after much effort only a handful could be collected.

When the enemy entered **Galatas** on the heels of 18 Battalion, 10 Brigade's left flank, held by **Russell Force**, was in danger of being cut off. The main elements of that force, including Divisional Petrol, had succeeded in making a fighting withdrawal. But **Kippenberger**, with his communications cut, was in the dark about its fate. He was also concerned over the probable effects of an enemy break-through on his centre, at **Galatas**. This would enable the Germans to drive north to the

coast road, and thus also encircle his right flank, which he had managed with great difficulty to restore. At all cost, he decided, **Galatas**



Dinner-time in Syria

Dinner-time in Syria

Pulling out from Asluj, June 1942



Pulling out from Asluj, June 1942



Petrol Company group in the Western Desert

Petrol Company group in the Western Desert

Workshops detachment at Amiriya



Workshops detachment at Amiriya



Mick Hall, George Ellison, Don Craig, Doug Meurk and
— Hutchison

Mick Hall, George Ellison, Don Craig, Doug Meurk and —Hutchison

Don Craig and Laurie Butters bedded down beside their truck



Don Craig and Laurie Butters bedded down beside their truck



Loading supplies. The German water tank in this photograph was picked up in the desert and repaired by 13 Section

Loading supplies. The German water tank in this photograph was picked up in the desert and repaired by 13 Section



Mud at **Sidi Haneish**, November 1942

must be held. The arrival, a little before eight in the evening, of two ancient Mark VI tanks under Lieutenant Roy Farran gave him some hope of retaking the village.

Kippenberger ordered Farran to take his tanks into **Galatas** to see what was there. Two companies of 23 Battalion were then told that they must retake the village with the help of the tanks when they returned, moving straight up the road, with one company on either side of it in single file.

Following the tanks and infantry went a number of men out of touch with their own units, including Petrol Company's Norman **Lambert**,⁵³ Jack Plumtree, and several others who had been on duty at Brigade Headquarters. Though both tanks struck trouble and Farran and his crew were wounded, the attack succeeded brilliantly. The battle-worn infantry charged as though inspired, completely routing the Germans from the town. But despite this success, which gave a much-needed breathing space, there was no hope now of re-establishing our line. A new and shorter one east of **Karatsos** was ordered to be formed next day. But the writing was already on the wall. By 26 May it was clear that **Crete** could no longer be defended. Withdrawal and evacuation—the mixture as before—remained as the only alternative.

On the night of 26-27 May a general retreat began to **Sfakia**, a little

fishing village on the south coast, which had been fixed as the main point of embarkation. This meant for Petrol Company and others—who had been fighting day and night since the morning of 20 May—a forced march of about 40 miles over steep mountainous country. Most found this a harrowing experience; for many it entailed extremes of hardship.

Norm Lambert, for example, wore the soles from his boots and continued walking with bleeding feet in the remains of his socks. He was fortunate in getting a lift for about three miles up one of the bigger hills. By dusk he had reached a point about 2000 feet above sea level, overlooking **Sfakia**. He had no blanket, no overcoat, only his service uniform. The night was so cold, he says, that he and his companions cut branches off the pine trees and covered themselves that way. Next day they were forbidden to go down to the beach. He got off by night in **HMAS Perth**, which was attacked on the way to Egypt by enemy planes. He and some mates were leaning against the warship's galley when the aircraft were spotted. The New Zealanders moved away to watch proceedings, and immediately a bomb hit the place where they had been standing. It killed the ship's cooks, accounting altogether for about sixteen men. Had it landed just a little further forward, Lambert says, the bomb would have claimed a great many more.

George Baldwin also had foot trouble on the march, having started off in a pair of size nine boots. He normally took size seven; but an issue had been made at **Galatas** on the basis of one pair to every sixty men, and since George had then worn right through his soles, the only pair available was issued to him. On the hike to **Sfakia** they reduced his feet to a raw and bleeding mess. To make matters worse, Baldwin like a number of others was suffering from dysentery. For a time he joined a party of our Engineers, who would march for an hour then halt for ten minutes. 'At one of these halts I went to sleep, and when I woke up there was no one there. I was entirely on my own, and never felt so lonely in my life. It was the middle of the night, but I got up and walked on alone. Eventually I joined up with Phil Keddell and one other bloke from Pet Coy; but I was so sick with dysentery that I reached a stage where I

could go no further, so I told the others to push on ahead. Later I recovered a little and picked up with Fleck, a **20 Bn** chap with a wounded ankle. I was able to help him a bit. When we got to **Sfakia** we ran into a mob of the **20 Battalion**. They were told to toss out anyone not known to be in their unit; but as I had helped Fleck I was allowed to go along, and so got off **Crete** with the Twentieth.'

Jim Ottaway's story starts after he had lost touch with the Company in the darkness during the night of the withdrawal from **Galatas**.

I attached myself to an artillery unit which had four guns on the hill above the village. As the officer in charge decided it was too risky for the guns to remain there, they and the troop moved out towards **Canea** at approximately 0200 hrs next morning. I walked behind the guns until nearing **Canea**. I was compelled to rest by the roadside and so lost touch with the artillery unit. That day I tried to get in touch with the Div Pet Coy picquet which had been left in **Canea**, but as the town had been destroyed the day before, I found no sign of the picquet. I marched for a time with a party of the **18 Bn** and on the way encountered Dvrs **Campbell**⁵⁴ and **Lillico**.⁵⁵ They had not seen anything of the Pet Coy, but had heard of an order to proceed to an evacuation point on the other side of the island. When I returned after a temporary absence I found they had already started off.

I walked to the evacuation point that night and took cover for the day as enemy bombers were overhead. When dusk came I proceeded to the barrier at the beach and learned that only walking wounded were being taken off. Subsequently, however, volunteers were called for a loading party to unload stores from the boats and transport them up the beach some distance. I volunteered for the work and when the job was finished the British officer in charge told the party they could go aboard the destroyer. I did so and arrived in **Alexandria** on the afternoon of 29 May. With the exception of Dvrs **Campbell** and **Lillico** I saw no Div Pet personnel from the night of the retreat from **Galatos** until I boarded the destroyer at **Sfakia**.

Sergeant Stephens was less fortunate. After helping to carry out wounded men from **Galatas** he and three Petrol Company drivers set out to find the Company or Captain Rowe. Failing to do so, they tagged on to 20 Battalion. Some distance past **Suda** they dug in. Then Captain **Veitch** ⁵⁶ of the **4 RMT** came along and called for all NZASC men, saying, 'You'll have to come back with me'. Stephens, impressed by the orderliness of the battalion as opposed to the evident disorder of all other troops in sight, refused to go. Veitch then went to **Colonel Kippenberger** and asked him for orders to withdraw the ASC men from the battalion and the Colonel agreed. Thus Stephens and his party left with Captain Veitch.

Somewhere on the way to **Sfakia** Stephens was put in charge of a group of 100 Australians and with them he continued until they found their own officers. He ended up, he says, in a cave with twenty men and two British officers, who managed to get some food (two tins) and brought back news that they would not embark that night (27 May). They stayed where they were for two or three days; then one morning the British officers vanished and German soldiers appeared. Surrender (which had been authorised for all troops left behind) was then their only course.

Drivers **Guy**, ⁵⁷ **O'Connor** ⁵⁸ and **Erle Stewart** came off with a battalion of 5 Brigade. They made their way to **Canea** and eventually to a point south of **Suda Bay**, where they met Major Davis of Supply Company. He informed them where to go to embark, 'the only definite orders we received', Stewart says, 'and the last contact made with an ASC officer. In the vicinity of **Sfakia** we were told to hole up. Over the last three days rations were conspicuous by their absence. A big portion of Pet Coy were at the embarkation point at the same time as ourselves, but no effort was made to organize them. After two days spent in vain efforts to get into an organized party we attached ourselves to the **23 Bn.**'

Several other survivors mention the difficulty of procuring food and

water during the retreat, though Corporal Rimmer recalls that a ration point had been established on the road and supplies were handed out to the troops as they passed. However, most Petrol Company men who escaped travelled across country, keeping off the roads and making no contact with official assembly areas. 'These men', says one, 'kept on down to the beach and had no difficulty in embarking on the waiting ships. The others, comprising about 75% of Pet Coy survivors, waited patiently on the hill for orders to proceed to the beach, but due to some misunderstanding regarding insufficient shipping, they waited until the last and were then told that no more men could be taken off. Shortly afterwards the Germans arrived and the men had no alternative but to lay down their arms.'

Driver Stanger, who came off with the Engineers, could also find, when he reached the assembly point, no arrangements for getting NZASC units off the island. He puts in a good word for the unit 'spud barbers'—Bill Ambrose, Maurie Smylie,⁵⁹ Davey Hall,⁶⁰ Eric Sutton,⁶¹ and others—who worked under great difficulty in both Greece and Crete, yet still managed to claim quite a few German 'scalps.'

Arthur Stubbs,⁶² before being captured on Crete, had some humorous experiences. He and Fred Davey were helping a wounded comrade out of Galatas when both were hit by bomb fragments. They handed over their charge at a dressing station on the coast, where both received 'walking wounded' chits for evacuation from Suda Bay. On the way to Suda, however, Stubbs acquired a donkey, with the idea of riding instead of walking. But the donkey proving stubborn, and Stubbs being more so, Fred Davey pushed on and left them to it.

Eventually, minus the donkey, Stubbs made his way to Suda, where he picked up with Geoff Harman⁶³ of Petrol Company. They found an abandoned naval store near the Bay, 'chocka- block with food and kegs of rum', so they helped themselves. By this time things were getting pretty hot in the Suda area, so, hearing that evacuation was taking place at Sfakia, they followed the crowd and arrived there in the middle of the night. Some British officers at the assembly area gave Stubbs a

message to take to **General Freyberg**. This he delivered just as 'Tiny' was stepping into a boat to embark in a flying boat moored offshore; and Stubbs believes he was the last person to speak to the GOC on **Crete**.

When he reported back to the officers, they said, 'Good show. Now we are going to turn it in'. Stubbs refused to believe that this meant surrender for the thousands of soldiers still left on **Crete**. But so it proved; and he and Harman went 'into the bag'. But they soon walked out of it; and what with numerous escapes and recaptures Arthur Stubbs spent almost a year on the island.

One of the most dramatic evacuation stories is told by Petrol Company's Corporal D. R. Plumtree, one of a party which escaped from **Crete** in an invasion barge and landed—after running out of petrol—on the Egyptian coast near **Sidi Barrani**. By 3 a.m. on 1 June, Plumtree found himself only a few hundred yards from the beach at **Sfakia**, among troops packed five deep and extending about a mile to the rear. He writes:

Orders were shouted from the beach for all troops to remove magazines and bolts from their rifles. This order being complied with we were told that there would be no further evacuation of troops from **Crete**. It was suggested by officers that we were to show as much white cloth as possible and dispense with arms and ammunition as we were to surrender. The troops then dispersed about the village and surrounding hills.

I decided upon a couple of hours sleep after which I went in search of rations of which there were none to be found. I then went in search of a suitable place of refuge, and was successful in finding a cave about a half mile east of the village on the water's edge. No sooner had I reached there when several enemy aircraft began strafing and dive bombing the village in spite of the white towels and handkerchiefs being waved by the troops. This attack lasted about half an hour and I have no idea as to casualties inflicted. The attack was made between 0900 and 0930 hrs.

While I was sheltering there, I heard noises of metal bumping against rock and upon investigating, found an invasion barge SD 15 moored inside a cave. On this barge were miscellaneous personnel including **Dvr N. Christall** ⁶⁴ of **Petrol Coy**, two ASC attached **5 Fd Amb** and one member of Div Sup Coln. Their names were unknown to me....

We remained in concealment during the daylight hours of the 1st June and at 2145 hrs with a complement of 63 men we proceeded on our voyage. We left our departure to nightfall owing to the fact that German troops were in **Sfakia**. As we left the shore we were subjected to intense machine gun fire by enemy troops from the village. No casualties were inflicted. By pursuing a zigzag course we were out of range within a few minutes. At approximately 0200 hrs June 2nd we struck a submerged rock on the southern tip of Gaudavous Island some forty miles south of **Sfakia**. Owing to the receding tide we were unable to refloat the barge so we unloaded all our stores and dispersed on the island. While on the island we split up into foraging parties in an endeavour to build up our meagre store of rations and water. We were not very successful in this matter but were able to fill every available vessel with brackish water.

At approximately 1600 hrs the barge was refloated but one ballast tank was full of water. We got the barge into a suitable place of concealment whereupon we proceeded to bail and pump the water out of it and reloaded our provisions. Fourteen men decided to remain on the island owing to the meagre rations on the ship, so we arranged a prominent rendezvous for a flare position for Naval or **RAF** craft. We equipped them with the best of our boots and clothing also water bottles and all available money, so that they could purchase food from the local inhabitants. Just as we were about to sail, four Australians and one Greek who had made their way from **Crete** in a rowing boat joined our party, thus giving us a total of 54 men. We left the island at approximately 2100 hrs on 2 June and at 1600 hrs on 3 June ran out of petrol. We were then about one hundred miles from **Crete**. By making use of several poles and sewing blankets together we made a mast and sail which assisted our progress considerably. Thanks to favourable

winds and fervent prayers we sighted land at 1100 hrs 8 June. We beached our craft approximately 6 miles East of **Sidi Barrani** at 0130 hrs on 9 June.

We were fortunate landing near a camp of the RASC who, upon being awakened, made us a cup of tea and a meal. The OC made arrangements for transport to **Mersa Matruh** leaving at 1830 hrs the same day. Upon arrival at Mersa we were bedded down at the Transit Camp. We entrained for **Amiriya** at 0630 hrs and arrived at 1400 hrs 10th June. There we were fed and re-equipped to the extent of a change of clothes and toilet gear.

We left there at 1100 hrs 12 June per RASC convoy and arrived at Kasr-el-Nil Barracks at 1700 hrs. From there we were transported to Base Reception Depot, **Maadi**, thence moved to our various Units.

All troops left behind on **Crete** had been authorised by General Wavell to surrender, but many roamed at large for months, dodging the Jerries and being sheltered and helped by friendly Cretans. Such aid brought the islanders savage reprisals; in some cases they were shot in batches of twenty or thirty, often including people quite unconnected with the 'crime'. Some men from Petrol Company rejoined the unit in Egypt after weeks of wandering through **Turkey** and the **Mediterranean** islands. Others repeatedly walked out on their German captors, spending a year or more on **Crete** before being finally caught and caged.

A most persistent spurner of German 'hospitality' was Petrol Company's Driver W. J. **Siely**,⁶⁵ who escaped three times on **Crete**, and four times from various stalags and working camps in **Germany**. Siely finally gained his liberty when he and a Tommy and two Frenchmen were smuggled aboard a Swedish vessel at Stettin. For five days they stayed hidden in the air-shaft of the main funnel, and were later put ashore at Kalmar, **Sweden**, eventually reaching **Britain** in August 1944. Siely's exploits won him the DCM.⁶⁶

The official history, **Crete**, also details the adventures of other Petrol

Company escapists, viz., Drivers J. Symes,⁶⁷ F. P. H. McCoy,⁶⁸ W. H. Swinburne,⁶⁹ P. L. Winter and H. F. Mace. Besides breaking out in Crete, Winter also got away from a prison in Greece, after which he received a brutal beating-up. Symes dodged about, living in caves, and evading German round-up parties, for nearly two years. He finally made contact with a New Zealand staff-sergeant, T. Moir⁷⁰ (who was helping with an escape organisation on Crete), and got off the island in May 1943.

Swinburne stayed even longer, and had some amazing adventures. In one village he was served with a request to 'move on' when the locals became understandably alarmed at the prospect of reprisals. The local constable saw to his departure, politely but firmly, shaking hands on the outskirts of the township and wishing him a successful escape. For a time he joined a guerrilla band in the Lasithi Mountains. Eventually Swinburne and twenty others got away in a motor torpedo-boat, reaching Mersa Matruh at the end of August 1943.

Though wounded and unable to escape, Sergeant Walsh also had some remarkable experiences while a PW in Crete. At one stage a messenger came into the compound inquiring for Petrol Company men from Galatas.

'Why?' asked Walsh.

'Never mind why', was the answer. 'The officer will say why.'

The officer wanted to know if Walsh had buried any Germans at Galatas. Walsh replied that his section had—quite a number. He was then asked if he knew anything about a German colonel, buried with four New Zealanders. On replying that he did, Walsh was put into a truck and taken to the German headquarters at Canea.

There a high-ranking officer told him through an interpreter: 'We've brought you here to ask about a German colonel, buried with four New Zealanders in front of Galatos. His body has more than a hundred bullet-

holes. How do you account for that?’

Walsh explained that the officer's parachute had caught in a tree, and his body had stayed there for forty-eight hours, dangling and spinning. No one could tell, from a distance, if the man were alive or dead, so everybody who passed that way took a pot at him.

The officer then said, ‘I am going to ask you a question, and I want you to tell me the truth, or I will make things very hot for you. Are you quite sure that this man was not put up against a wall and shot?’

Walsh replied, ‘I've never seen any German put up against a wall and shot. We don't do such things’.

‘Why was he buried with four New Zealanders? The Germans are your enemies.’

‘What difference does it make? During the action there were a lot of unburied dead from both sides. A bomb-crater was handy so our men used it.’

The officer finished by saying that he thought Walsh had answered truthfully. He added that if he could do the sergeant any small favour he would. He had already given Walsh ten cigarettes (which were like gold at that time), so our man spoke up:

‘A New Zealand corporal and I helped to bury our officer, Captain McDonagh, in a potato field, after he had been killed by a cannon-shell from a Messerschmitt, and was laid out by a Greek woman in her own home. But he had only about eighteen inches of earth over him. We would like him to receive a proper burial.’

The officer replied that at that moment burial squads, supervised by Germans, were digging up all the dead around **Galatas** and burying them in mass graves. He promised that he would have a cross made, inscribed with Captain McDonagh's name and other details. But whether this was ever done or not, Walsh does not know.

About two months later, he says, he and a lot of others were put aboard a filthy old coal-boat and battened down in the holds with little food or water, no medical attention for the wounded, and no sanitation. They remained under those conditions for about five days while their convoy, comprising similar boats carrying Greeks, and escorted by two Italian destroyers, nosed up through the Dodecanese Islands. Ships of the **Royal Navy** 'skittled' the convoy, and Walsh's boat turned back to Dratos. It stayed there for a day and a night, then sneaked across to **Salonika**.

¹ *The Second World War*, Vol. III, pp. 179–80.

² *Ibid*, p. 217.

³ **Rev. J. Hiddlestone**, MBE, ED; born **Christchurch**, 19 Mar 1893; Baptist minister; p.w. May 1941; deceased.

⁴ **Maj A. G. Hood**, ED; **Auckland**; born **Auckland**, 29 May 1912; company manager; OC 6 RMT Coy Oct 1941-Feb 1942; Assistant Director Supply and Transport, Army HQ (in NZ) 1942–46.

⁵ **Maj H. M. Lewis**; **London**; born **Wanganui**, 27 Dec 1908; company secretary.

⁶ **Maj C. Wilson**, m.i.d., MC (Gk); born England, 25 Aug 1907; insurance clerk; killed in action 21 May 1941.

⁷ **Dvr R. H. Johnson**; **Gisborne**; born South Africa, 13 Jan 1917; labourer.

⁸ **Dvr N. C. Bryant**; **Stratford**; born NZ 4 Apr 1918; truck driver.

⁹ **Cpl G. E. Baldwin**; **Auckland**; born NZ 10 Aug 1917; nurseryman.

¹⁰ Sgt J. S. Plumtree; New Plymouth; born NZ 8 Nov 1916; garage attendant.

¹¹ Dvr W. H. Holland; Feilding; born Martinborough, 5 Dec 1913; grocer; wounded 20 May 1941; p.w. 26 May 1941.

¹² Cpl L. H. Lawton; Tawa, Wellington; born Foxton, 19 Apr 1914; painter; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

¹³ Dvr H. Eckersley, MM, m.i.d.; Belmont, Lower Hutt; born England, 30 Jan 1911; motor assembler; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

¹⁴ Cpl D. T. Peel-Walker, MM; Melbourne; born NZ 25 Nov 1911; driver.

¹⁵ Dvr C. J. Neilson; Rotorua; born NZ 6 May 1915; labourer.

¹⁶ Dvr J. D. Piper; born NZ 17 Jul 1917; Public Works Dept employee; killed in action 20 May 1941.

¹⁷ Dates of casualties mentioned in these eye-witness accounts do not always agree with the official casualty lists. See also [Roll of Honour](#).

¹⁸ Dvr B. U. Stanger; Oamaru; born Auckland, 12 Dec 1913; farm labourer.

¹⁹ Sgt N. M. Stewart, MM, EM and clasp; Te Puke; born Christchurch, 21 Dec 1914; motor driver; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

²⁰ Cpl J. K. Bailie; Sydney; born Gisborne, 5 Sep 1905; diesel engineer; wounded May 1941.

²¹ Dvr J.R. Gradon; born England, 31 Dec 1914; labourer; p.w. 1

Jun 1941.

²² Sgt J. A. Kinnuman; Linton Camp; born London, 28 Feb 1916; labourer; p.w. 1 Jun 1941; now Regular Force, RNZASC.

²³ Col H. K. Christie, CBE, ED; Wanganui; born Invercargill, 13 Jul 1894; surgeon; surgeon I Gen Hosp Mar 1940-Apr 1941; OC surgical team, Greece and Crete; in charge surgical division I Gen Hosp, Aug 1941-Jun 1943; CO 2 Gen Hosp Jun 1943-Oct 1944.

²⁴ Maj Dickson and Capt Ramsden had returned to Egypt soon after the Greek campaign. 2 Lt Trewby became a casualty while in Canea and he, too, was evacuated. On 14 May 2 Lt Collins, with Sgt Greig, Cpl K. A. Bailey and 28 men, had been posted to Canea for picket duty.

²⁵ Sgt G. C. Stephens; Blenheim; born NZ 6 Feb 1919; cook; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

²⁶ Sgt I. W. Church; born Invercargill, 17 Oct 1906; motor mechanic; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

²⁷ Dvr E. C. Watkins; born London, 9 Oct 1910; tram conductor.

²⁸ Dvr O. G. Jones; m.i.d.; Otaki; born Otaki, 9 Feb 1918; motor mechanic; wounded 21 May 1941.

²⁹ Dvr C. E. Barker; Wellington; born Wanganui, 16 Apr 1920; sheetmetal worker.

³⁰ Capt S. M. Almao; Wanganui; born NZ 28 Jul 1909; clerk, P & T Dept; wounded May 1941; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

³¹ Cpl H. J. Putt; Otakeho, Taranaki; born NZ 9 Jan 1907; fitter.

- 32 Dvr A. G. Bloomfield; born NZ 23 Jun 1918; mechanic; wounded and p.w. 1 Jun 1941.**
- 33 WO II J. H. Ottaway; Petone; born Laurence, 19 Feb 1903; civil servant.**
- 34 Cpl J. M. Reefman; born NZ 25 Jan 1906; secretary; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.**
- 35 Dvr V. R. Sergent; born NZ 28 Jul 1914; lorry driver; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.**
- 36 Lt-Col J. T. Russell, DSO, m.i.d.; born Hastings, 11 Nov 1904; farmer; CO 22 Bn Feb-Sep 1942; wounded May 1941; killed in action 6 Sep 1942.**
- 37 Capt H. A. Rowe, MC; Piha; born Hokitika, 12 Aug 1914; salesman; OC Pet Coy 20 May-1 Jun 1941; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.**
- 38 Kippenberger, *Infantry Brigadier*, p. 61.**
- 39 Maj B. I. Bassett, m.i.d.; born NZ 12 Sep 1911; barrister and solicitor; BM 10 Bde May 1941; BM 4 Bde Aug 1941-Jan 1942, Jun-Jul 1942; killed in action 5 Jul 1942.**
- 40 Dvr K. J. Payne, m.i.d.; London; born England, 22 Apr 1911; clerk; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.**
- 41 Cpl H. O. Thwaites; born Auckland, 30 Oct 1908; motor driver; killed in action 25 May 1941.**
- 42 Cpl J. E. Hurdley; Waikanae; born Timaru, 9 Jul 1906; bus driver; wounded 29 May 1941; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.**

43 Dvr A. N. Norton; born Otahuhu, 19 Dec 1916; taxi driver; died of wounds while p.w. 2 Jun 1941.

44 Dvr C. R. Standen; born Masterton, 17 Aug 1914; tram conductor; died of wounds 21 May 1941.

45 L-Cpl W. F. Hearn; Havelock North; born Hokitika, 20 Aug 1912; linesman.

46 Dvr A. H. A. Ruback; born NZ 4 Jan 1907; driver; died of wounds 22 May 1941.

47 Dvr R. G. Depper; Canada; born England 6 Dec 1903; motor driver; wounded 22 May 1941.

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

49 Lt J. P. Dill, m.i.d.; born England, 30 Aug 1915; fur merchant; died of wounds while p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

50 This group had been billeted alongside the Greek HQ and when the invasion began moved to the British Provost HQ where they took up defensive positions in conjunction with the Tommy and Australian redcaps. In the first few days the group noted little beyond the frequent bombing of the town and the internment of a good number of German prisoners. On Saturday, 24 May, Collins and Greig, considering it their duty to rejoin the hard-pressed Company, set off for **Galatas** at 10 a.m.

On that afternoon seven men were killed as the result of a direct bomb hit through the centre of their building and another simultaneously against the west wall. None of these casualties were New Zealanders. The same evening the picket group moved to a position on a hillside north of **Canea**, where they stayed one day, moving out on Monday, 26 May, because of severe bombing

attacks on the area. They had been ordered by Force HQ to that position—right alongside an ammunition dump, with trucks parked all round, and a naval gun just behind them! On the night of 26-27 May the party moved towards **Suda Bay**, where it became separated. Only six or seven of this group eventually rejoined the unit in Egypt.

⁵¹ **L-Cpl H. J. Crocker; Auckland; born NZ 10 Feb 1918; millhand mechanic; wounded 25 May 1941.**

⁵² **Davin, *Crete*, p. 306.**

⁵³ **Dvr N. F. Lambert; Onehunga; born NZ 1 Jun 1916; grocer.**

⁵⁴ **Dvr J. Campbell; Auckland; born Edinburgh, 4 May 1906; builder.**

⁵⁵ **Dvr W. J. Lillico; born England, 3 Mar 1912; painter.**

⁵⁶ **Capt J. Veitch; born Scotland, 2 Feb 1901; omnibus driver; died while p.w. 3 Jun 1941.**

⁵⁷ **Cpl M. C. Guy; Wellington; born NZ 20 Sep 1914; transport driver.**

⁵⁸ **Maj C. W. O'Connor; Lower Hutt; born Gisborne, 7 May 1914; motor mechanic; now Regular Force; DAD EME, Central Military District.**

⁵⁹ **Cpl M. V. Smylie; Feilding; born Chatham Islands, 2 Mar 1921; iron moulder.**

⁶⁰ **Dvr D. Hall; born Aust., 7 Mar 1906; labourer; died 15 Mar 1957.**

⁶¹ Dvr E. S. Sutton; Te Horo; born Otaki, 8 Oct 1916; farmer; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

⁶² L-Cpl A. G. Stubbs; Wellington; born NZ 18 May 1907; mechanic; wounded May 1941; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

⁶³ Dvr G. B. Harman; Hastings; born NZ 28 Dec 1917; clerk; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

⁶⁴ Dvr N. Christall; Lower Hutt; born NZ 9 Mar 1909; driver.

⁶⁵ Dvr W. J. Siely, DCM; Trentham; born NZ 24 Jul 1918; printer; p.w. 1 Jun 1941; escaped Jul 1944.

⁶⁶ See W. W. Mason, *Prisoners of War*.

⁶⁷ Dvr J. Symes, m.i.d.; Hawera; born NZ 1 Sep 1915; storeman; wounded 31 May 1941; p.w. 1 Jun 1941; escaped 18 Jun 1941; returned to Egypt May 1943.

⁶⁸ Dvr F. P. H. McCoy; London; born Wellington, 10 Jan 1918; labourer; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

⁶⁹ Dvr W. H. Swinburne; Wellington; born Wellington, 7 Oct 1917; painter; wounded 21 May 1941; p.w. 1 Jun 1941; escaped 21 Jun 1941; returned to Egypt Sep 1943.

⁷⁰ S-Sgt T. Moir, DCM, MM; Rotorua; born Gisborne, 4 Jan 1917; service-station attendant; p.w. 1 Jun 1941; escaped Jun 1941; returned to Egypt Apr 1942; seconded to British unit for special service work, 1942; recaptured on Crete, May 1943.

PETROL COMPANY

CHAPTER 9 – LIBYA, 1941

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Libya, 1941

ON 3 June 1941 one officer ¹ and 49 other ranks of the Divisional Petrol Company arrived back in Egypt, more than pleased to encounter once again the heat, flies, filth and general degradation of that benighted country. Relief was not unmixed with sombre feelings. The Company had lost 25 (including one officer) killed or died of wounds in **Crete**, and 62 wounded. Besides these, about 120 Divisional Petrol personnel were still somewhere on the island, in a total of over 12,000 Imperial troops left behind there.

The main task facing the Company now was to rebuild, retrain and re-equip. Some useful lessons were drawn from battle experience in the two previous campaigns. In **Crete** especially, the need for physical fitness, the ability to undertake long marches, and a sound knowledge of the use of infantry weapons had been clearly demonstrated. These lessons, learned the hard way, were emphasised in Petrol Company's subsequent training programmes.

On 13 May the **5th Reinforcements** (from which the Company was largely rebuilt) had arrived at **Suez**, in a convoy which included some of the largest vessels then afloat, for example the giant Cunarders *Queen Mary* and *Queen Elizabeth*, which joined the convoy with Australian troops at **Sydney**. New Zealanders travelled in the *Mauretania* (carrying ASC reinforcements), the *Aquitania*, and the *Nieuw Amsterdam*—all now stripped of their luxury-line fittings and rigged out with the bare essentials for troop-carrying.

The voyage was uneventful, and uncomfortable. The ASC shared cramped quarters below decks, where they slept in canvas hammocks slung above the mess-tables. Some men slept on or under the tables. Rough seas early in the voyage caused much sickness. Harassed MOs faced long queues on the daily sick parades but had little to offer beyond aspirin tablets.

These were usually ejected, together with other stomach contents, as soon as they were swallowed. Grey-faced, the men then returned to duty.

Training aboard ship pressed on, interspersed with boat-drill, inspections, and the inevitable queuing for meals, beer, pay and pictures. Off duty the men read, wrote letters, played cards and other games—‘Housie’ (permitted), crown-and-anchor (forbidden), bridge, euchre, Slippery Sam, and the rest. Brighter moments came at the various ports of call: **Sydney** (no shore leave, but much interest in Our Bridge and Our ‘Arbour); **Fremantle**, with excursions to **Perth** (*not* on foot); Colombo, where a stay of nearly two weeks made a memorable interlude; and finally **Port Tewfik**.

Throughout the voyage the ships’ radios blared tidings that grew progressively worse, as our Division, pursuing its hopeless mission in **Greece**, was forced to evacuate and then to stand as best it could on **Crete**. In the **Western Desert**, too, German troops had appeared and, led by Rommel, were threatening Egypt. The reinforcements, some of them conscripted men, listened and wondered.

Arrival and settling-in at Base Camp followed much the same pattern as for earlier drafts. More progress had been made with camp construction, more amenities provided. But the ASC Fifths were not destined to linger yet amid **Maadi**’s ‘pleasures and palaces’. Because of an outbreak of influenza they were confined for ten days at **Garawi**—a bleak desert camp providing the bare minima for human subsistence.

Meanwhile the mercury hovered around the hundred mark, and often went above it. Earlier in the month a record temperature of 119 degrees in the shade had been registered; but there was little shade at **Garawi**. Rations for a time were scant and unappetising. Surface pipes carrying water to the camp became too hot to touch; their liquid, heavily chlorinated, was anything but refreshing. So the Fifths went on wondering just what they had let themselves in for!

They soon found out. **Garawi** was followed by a short, sharp course at

the ASC Base Training Depot, **Maadi**, under the loving care of Second-Lieutenant Chas Graham and Major John Hunter, both originally of the Petrol Company. On 18 June eighty-two were drafted out to the makings of a new Petrol Company at **Helwan**. Other drafts followed; and, with the **Crete** survivors back from their seven days' special leave, the reconstituted Company settled down to serious training.

At Helwan a new OC, Capt **Forbes**,² who replaced Major Dickson on 26 June, grappled with the problems of reconstruction.

'I had just come back from the ASC School where I had been an instructor', Stan Forbes recalls, 'when I was informed by the Colonel that I was to take over the Company. I went down to the unit to see what was there. I found nothing there, except the battered remnant from **Crete**. There was no orderly room, no records, no paycards, nothing. The first job was purely administrative—to set up a Headquarters to start to control something which was going to be rebuilt. Then the reinforcements began to arrive—and in the midst of it all I got German measles!'

Reorganisation brought the Company a number of new officers. On 28 June came Second-Lieutenant M. G. **Browne**,³ fresh from OCTU and before that from **4 RMT**. A keen cricketer and a New Zealand representative hockey player, 'Brownie' gave a boost to the Company's sporting life.

Lieutenant **Hastie**⁴ transferred in on 30 June, while three days later Staff-Sergeant A. S. Rusden and Corporal A. T. Rimmer marched out to NZASC Base Training, as candidates for OCTU. On 15 July Captain Forbes and Lieutenant Hastic were promoted acting major and captain respectively. Next day the Company gained Second-Lieutenant Bill **Swarbrick**,⁵ a lively youngster also fresh from OCTU, and previously from Divisional Ammunition Company. On 19 July Sergeant **Wallace**⁶ (alias the 'Black Tracker') marched in as acting CSM.

While all this was going on, drivers and NCOs, though lacking

vehicles, were kept hard at work. Training included night route marches along the Nile and over the moonlit desert—for ten miles on 7 July, 15 miles on 9 July, and 20 miles the next night. And the farther the troops pushed on into the desert the surer they were to encounter Abdul—or Ahmed—rising wraithlike from among the sand-dunes to offer ice-cream, bottles of gaziz, or juicy water-melons. Such fare, though forbidden, was often bought, and eagerly consumed, by the perspiring ‘askaris’.

Camped next at Mahfouz, the rebuilt Company paraded, practised musketry, mounted guard, learned to read maps. Most training was done between daybreak and noon, with a compulsory siesta in the early afternoon, followed by recreational training. With the help of Ken May, who had left Petrol Company and was now a one-pipper in Divisional Ammunition Company, a gas chamber was rigged up in a disused cookhouse, airproofed with army blankets. The officers laid on genuine WD tear-gas, and through this our lads, muffled in their respirators, went one by one, cursing and panting.

The idea was to test the efficiency of the men's anti-gas equipment. But so small and hot was the room, and so heavy the concentration of gas, that the fumes stung the skins of the sweating soldiery, who, thinking they were encountering mustard gas, hopped about in great style. Such stunts, however, helped to break the monotony, as did the afternoon sports activities run by Maurie Browne and other officers. These now included Second-Lieutenant Bill Washbourn,⁷ marched in on 27 July.

For MT training there were lectures, and, in Workshops Section, practical work such as brake and steering overhauls. Until 31 July, however, the Company's MT was largely imaginary. On that date a party under Captain Torbet⁸ collected from Tel-el-Kebir ten Matchless motor-cycles, ten Royal Enfields, one workshops vehicle, one stores vehicle, and various technical kits. The Company's mileage for the month was: motor-cycles 4609, trucks 45, total 4654—a far cry from the tremendous totals notched by this and the other ASC companies in days ahead.

By July the weather was still extremely hot and, with the Nile rising rapidly, becoming very muggy. 'The mosquitoes are also putting in an appearance', one soldier wrote home, 'and I got chewed to Hell the other night'. That month, and in August, there was marked interest in the Divisional casualty lists, now making their appearance on camp notice-boards. The crowds gathered continually around these notices reflected current anxiety over the fate of comrades or relatives who had fought in Crete.

On 3 August Maurie Browne recorded: 'I have had a pretty busy week organizing our ASC athletic team. Sgt Cording⁹ (Pet Coy) is ASC representative on the Divisional Committee'. 'Brownie' himself was secretary of the NZASC committee. The first big function (a 2 NZEF sports meeting) took place on 5 August, with a general holiday for all troops not on necessary duties.

A fortnight later Browne wrote in a letter home: 'I'm so damned busy, and look like being so for weeks. Things are starting to hum. I've spent days bringing in new vehicles from a long distance away. Usually some stupid joker hits a Wog or runs into something while in the convoy and I have to spend hours making up accident reports and being a general insurance adjustor as it were. I'll have to dash off again shortly to get a statement from a Wog policeman re an accident in my convoy yesterday.'

Despite such contretemps the build-up of vehicle strength for the Company and for the Division (with Petrol Company acting as the Division's receiving and distributing unit) proceeded apace. By 15 August allocations totalled 115 three-ton Chevrolet trucks, 19 Ford V8 station wagons, 20 Dodge 8-cwt pick-ups, 3 workshops vehicles, 6 stores vehicles and 6 break down vehicles. While B and D (Workshops) Sections were attending to this, A and C Sections spent several days in the El Saff area on desert convoy practice. Small parties also marched out to 2 NZEF Rest Camp at Sidi Bishr.

During the latter half of August, vehicles continued to be drawn by Petrol Company from Nos. 9 and 10 Vehicle Reserve Depots and distributed to the Division. On 22 August Lieutenant Collins and Second-Lieutenant Washbourn, in charge of two detachments comprising 87 men and 36 vehicles, moved out for special duties at **Suez** and **Geneifa**. These included the carrying of troops (mostly Indians with English officers), and their baggage, from **Suez** to Qassasin (Collins's detachment); and general carrying under the orders of ADST, **Moascar** Area (Washbourn and party), mainly removing stores from RE dumps and delivering them to various points. In the course of these duties one driver, J. W. **Clare**,¹⁰ was accidentally killed. He was buried in the **Suez** Military Cemetery on 30 August, his loss being keenly felt by all his Petrol Company comrades.

September brought increased activity for Petrol Company as Divisional units, rebuilt and re-equipped, moved out from their base camps and again became desert dwellers. In the van went a detachment of B Section under Second-Lieutenant Browne to form the Petrol Detail of an NZASC Composite Company. Our detachment consisted of one officer, one sergeant and 27 other ranks, including a cook and a Supply Detail corporal. On 4 September the party set up camp three miles on the **Alexandria** side of **El Alamein**, from which point it proceeded to supply POL to **5 NZ Infantry Brigade**, then engaged in building defences at **Kaponga Box**.

After a series of desert exercises to give Company HQ and Section Headquarters practice in moving as separate entities and quickly establishing themselves with all components in working order at a given rendezvous, the main Company moved out in convoy on 15 September, setting up camp two days later on the sea coast near **Fuka**. Before that, Workshops Section had worked long hours painting and camouflaging vehicles sand-colour. Camouflage nets, bivvy tents, and other harbingers of an impending desert campaign were issued, and base kits put in store. That the Division, including Petrol Company, was again heading for action, nobody doubted.

By this time the Company was well prepared for the battle tests ahead. It had been thoroughly rehearsed in its operational role, and every man had developed a willingness to work hard for long hours, regardless of fatigue or other discomfort. A strong team spirit had also been built up, with officers, drivers and NCOs all pulling together in the best possible way. It was now, indeed, a reborn Company, strong, robust and thriving.

Two assignments in this pre-battle period gave drivers a taste of the variety involved in wartime carrying. The Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, back from **Eritrea**, were resting south of the escarpment between **Mersa Matruh** and Sidi Barrani. Petrol Company's C Section (under Second-Lieutenants Washbourn and **Chapman**¹¹) carted the 'Scotties' and their guns—including some captured Italian '75s'—to a point near the **Halfaya Pass**. This was done, Washbourn recalls, right under the noses of the enemy, who, with the early-morning sun in their eyes, sometimes failed to notice movement from the east.

Next task was to take a consignment of live goats, as food for 4 Indian Division, to a supply depot near **Sidi Barrani**. Anxious to quit his none-too-fragrant load, Washbourn led his convoy to the head of a line of trucks waiting to draw rations at the depot. A Tommy warrant officer, aged about 60, sat reading comics in the first vehicle of the queue. He obviously thought our officer 'a cheeky young b—', until Washbourn explained that he was bringing supplies, not collecting them.

Early in the year Rommel had built up his **Africa Corps** and put some stiffening into the Italian forces then in North Africa. The **Tobruk** fortress remained a persistent thorn in Rommel's side. Two strong attacks had failed to subdue it, so, faced with increasing British strength in North Africa, and short of petrol for his panzer formations, Rommel settled down to defend his conquests, which then extended to the Egyptian frontier.

He was planning, however, yet another assault on **Tobruk** during November; and by the beginning of that month almost the whole of the

enemy's North African army was in north-east **Cyrenaica**. Those forces were estimated at 110,000 men, about 380 medium tanks, and 1140 field and anti-tank guns. Air support by the *Luftwaffe* and the *Regia Aeronautica* was estimated to be greater than the **RAF** could provide, but in the event proved considerably less.

Against these forces the British Eighth Army, under Lieutenant-General Sir Alan Cunningham, was preparing to do battle. The Army consisted of four main groups: **30 Corps**, Eighth Army's main striking force, comprised 7 Armoured Division, 22 Armoured Brigade, 22 Guards Brigade, and **1 South African Division** (less one brigade). The role of this formation was to 'seek out and destroy the enemy armour'; it was then to relieve **Tobruk**.

The second formation, **13 Corps**, included the New Zealand Division, 4 Indian Division, and 1 Army Tank Brigade. Its role was to advance north after crossing the Wire and isolate the enemy's fortresses along the Egyptian frontier, later subduing them and rounding up the garrisons. Formations from **13 Corps** were also to swing westward later to join **30 Corps** and help clear a way into **Tobruk**. The other two elements of Eighth Army were the **Oases Group**, a composite force with its own special tasks to perform, deep in the enemy's rear; and the **Tobruk Garrison** (Tobforce), which would make a sortie in an effort to join up with the advancing forces of 30 and 13 Corps.

Such was the over-all plan, and by the beginning of November preparations for carrying it out were virtually complete. On 9 November the New Zealand Division received its 'marching orders' instructing the Division to move across the frontier south of the two Omars—enemy fortresses on either side of the Wire—on 18 November. The Omars were to be masked by 4 Indian Division. Our Division was then to swing northward and cut off the frontier posts as already explained. The date for this move depended upon the success of **30 Corps** in its clash with enemy armour. Fourth Armoured Brigade was detailed to protect the entire left flank of **13 Corps**.

In his campaign report ('The New Zealand Division in **Cyrenaica**') **General Freyberg** gives the following account of the Division's role: ' **5th Brigade** Group was to advance to the **Trigh Capuzzo** and sever that line of communication with the West, at the same time sending a patrol to cut the **Bardia- Capuzzo** water pipe line.

' **4th Brigade** Group was to advance on to the escarpment West of **Bardia**, block movement on the main **Bardia- Tobruk** Road and contain any enemy forces in the coastal area some miles further West by blocking tracks to the South across the steep escarpment.

' **6th Brigade** Group was in reserve to be ready to move to **Gambut** and later to come under command 30th Corps should they be needed to assist in the **Tobruk** Battle.

'The move of the Division to its assembly area at Bir **Kanayis**', the GOC continues, 'commenced on Armistice Day and was carried out as an exercise. No mention was yet made of an attack. I do not think that this deceived anybody. Each Brigade Group column, at 16 vehicles to the mile, was about 100 miles long and took, at 15 m.i.h., about seven hours to pass a given point. On the 14th, in the assembly area, we let everybody know the plan. I held a conference of officers down to company commanders and gave them a talk on the campaign just opening and the role we would probably have to fill.'

Petrol Company set out on its 90-mile move to the Divisional assembly area (30 miles south of **Mersa Matruh**) at 10 a.m. on 11 November. Their starting-point was **Fuka**, some 20 miles east of **Baggush**, from which the bulk of the Division departed; but ours was a slow convoy with many stops, and **Baggush** was not passed until 1.15 p.m. To add to their discomfort, many drivers had been kept awake by air raids the night before, when bombs were dropped on the landing ground at **Fuka**, and on other areas close to the ASC camp. On 11 November three Divisional Petrol Company trucks were detached for duty with **Divisional Cavalry**, then already in the forward area, under command of 4 Indian Division. From a petrol point at Bir Idwan, in the

assembly area, the Company issued POL as required by Divisional units.

By 14 November the whole Division was assembled and ready for action. In an area some twelve miles long by eight miles wide its 2800-odd vehicles, spaced at 200-yard intervals, were laagered, brigade by brigade. Next day, a clear and windless one, the Division, advancing for the first time as a complete formation, began its great 'approach march'. There was little dust; and this enormous mass of transport, tanks, guns, and carriers, covering the whole wide panorama of the desert plain, made a most impressive spectacle.

Travelling in desert formation, the Division covered about 50 miles to reach its first objective, Bir el Thalata. And one record maintains that never before had a British unit of similar size moved so far in battle order in the course of a single day. For the following two nights the advance continued, unchallenged, as the vast conglomeration of lorries, guns, staff cars, motor-cycles, AFVs and what-have-you rolled westward, resting during the day. On 18 November our Division reached 'the Wire', then poured through a 300-yard gap torn by the engineers at [El Beida](#).

Petrol Company drivers, like those of other units, found these night moves trying. They were slow affairs, made without lights, and with a ban on smoking. Vehicles moved in columns almost nose to tail, the drivers now straining to pick up the dim outline of the truck ahead, now cursing furiously as they slammed on brakes to avoid a collision. There was no deviating to by-pass rocks, soft patches, or steep declivities. These and other obstacles were taken as they came; for the Division followed a plotted course, moving on an axis marked by lanterns planted by the [Divisional Provost Company](#) at 1000-yard intervals along the route.

'One was constantly slithering down over steep banks, bumping against hummocks, falling heavily into abandoned slit trenches, or getting stuck in soft sand', wrote [Brigadier Kippenberger](#). 'But every difficulty would be surmounted, the lights were always found in the end, and a few minutes after daylight we halted and dispersed and every truck

brewed up for breakfast. During the day the stragglers and cripples were brought in by the indefatigable LAD, and next night the performance would start again.’¹²

While other people rested, Petrol Company drivers worked overtime—often round the clock—on a shuttle service to uplift petrol from forward dumps and carry it on to the points of issue. For a division on wheels is a ravenous monster, consuming enormous quantities of ‘juice’. At each halting-place petrol points were set up and Divisional units replenished.

From 12 to 19 November inclusive the Company issued 141,196 gallons of petrol, the daily hand-out sometimes exceeding 28,000 gallons, all in four-gallon tins. In that period D Section (Workshops) also worked flat out on repairs to vehicles and replacing spring-leaves, which took a heavy thrashing in the rough desert going. Our Company, often negotiating slit trenches and patches of rough ground in the dark, had only one vehicle casualty, a C Section lorry which dived into a gun pit. This truck was later recovered by D Section.

But for all this hard work, and the careful planning which preceded it, the estimates of petrol required for the move proved well astray. John Jensen¹³ in his ‘Unofficial History of 1 NZ Petrol Company’ (unpublished) observes:

In the matter of petrol consumption there is an astonishing difference between a desert move of fifty miles and the moving of the same distance over roads. Unit commanders had in general failed fully to appreciate the sharp decline in miles per gallon occasioned by low speed over bad going, so that before this first stage to Bir Thalata had been covered, not only had the petrol which had been estimated and drawn for it been used, but reserves had been drawn upon to an extent which in view of the initiatory nature of the move, gave cause for the gravest concern. An estimate of 25,000 gallons had been made for the journey but some 30,000 gallons had been used and the replacement of that quantity was outside the carrying capacity of the Petrol Company as then established.

The situation was aggravated by the use of leaky four-gallon tins. At the Bir Idwan dump alone, wastage was estimated at 14 per cent, and this percentage sharply increased after the tins were uplifted. The successive loading, off-loading and re-loading of the containers (appropriately dubbed 'flimsies') resulted in an alarming number of tins being delivered to the units either entirely empty or less than half full. It was heart-breaking for our drivers, after working day and night, to sit at their wheels for hours watching this precious fluid pouring in a steady stream from the trays of the trucks ahead.

In an effort to stop the rot, and keep the Division moving, all camp gear not absolutely essential was removed from Petrol Company's trucks and sent back. On 18 November ten lorries from other units were attached to the Company as load-carriers. Two days later C Section was relieved of its role as mobile ordnance reserve, carrying the Division's spare blankets, clothing, boots, etc., and its vehicles, also, were released for petrol carrying. Thus the Company was able to satisfy in full the Division's POL requirements.

This crisis in the petrol situation arose through no lack of thought on the part of our ASC officers. Under directions from Colonel Crump (Commander NZASC) and the Senior Supply Officer (Major [Bracegirdle](#)¹⁴) petrol containers to be used by the Division during the move had been hand-picked well ahead at [Baggush](#). After that they were 'nursed' in handling and transport, with the utmost care. At [Sidi Haneish](#) they were examined daily to ensure that every container was sound and likely to remain so. Leakers were weeded out and replaced.

But after all that, Major Bracegirdle had been summarily ordered by Army to deliver his cossetted supplies to a dump under Army command. Stocks for replacement were drawn from Railhead at [Daba](#). And it so happened that the trainload which our Division drew had been roughly treated en route.

On 18 November Eighth Army's main striking force (30 Corps with its brigades of tanks and other AFVs) crossed the Wire and achieved their

first object: complete surprise. They were even surprised themselves, and no doubt a little piqued, to find that Rommel had ignored their arrival in **Libya** and neglected to arrange a reception for them. This discourtesy was explained partly by poor German Intelligence, the almost entire absence of the *Luftwaffe*, and urgent business elsewhere— up around **Tobruk**, which at that time was receiving the *Africa Corps*' undivided attention. Or so Rommel thought. He was soon put right on that as **30 Corps**, intent on seeking and destroying the enemy's armour, fanned out towards the Trigh **Capuzzo**.

That same night, as we have seen, the bulk of the New Zealand Division also crossed the Wire. It then settled down in defensive positions about eight miles south of Libyan Sheferzen to await the outcome of **30 Corps**' tank battles. On the success of those depended the Division's next big move to get in behind the enemy's frontier forts by deploying northward as far as the escarpment. This was to be done by our 4 and 5 Brigade Groups, while 6 Brigade Group moved westward along the **Trigh Capuzzo** to assist **30 Corps** in its advance on **Tobruk**. In this move 6 Brigade Group was to function as a separate, self-contained entity with its own artillery, medical and other services, and with a squadron of I tanks under command.

With morale at its highest ('we felt like runners, tense for the pistol') the New Zealand Division awaited the word for action. The men made light of the chilly days and cold nights, the overcast skies and the occasional mud and rain (more frequent near the coast), the normal concomitants of a winter campaign in the desert. But several days passed without firm news of the fortunes of **30 Corps**.

When Rommel realised just who and what had arrived on his doorstep he reacted sharply. On the afternoon of 19 November *5 Panzer Regiment* launched a powerful attack on 4 Armoured Brigade only a few miles north-west of the New Zealand positions. The battle continued until dark when both sides ceased fire and laagered for the night. That same day 22 Armoured Brigade engaged enemy tanks near El Gubi, about 40 miles farther west, and suffered important losses. Meanwhile, **7**

Armoured Brigade, in the centre of **30 Corps**, had pushed on and captured the **Sidi Rezegh** landing ground, meeting little opposition.

Reports and rumours concerning the armoured battles were many and varied, and the real situation was by no means clear. Nevertheless, on the morning of 21 November the Division was ordered to move to **Sidi Azeiz**. This was the signal so eagerly awaited, the green light to send New Zealand troops, now armed and trained to the highest pitch, forward into battle; and the opening gambits worked like a charm. It was also a signal for the split-up of our Division to conform with a tactical system then prevailing—that of dispersal in brigade groups. This practice has since been severely criticised. Some authorities hold that Eighth Army, before it split up, was omnipotent, and could have rolled on to **Tobruk**, disregarding the immobile frontier garrisons and crushing everything in its path. In the outcome the Division and other elements of Eighth Army suffered heavy casualties and were involved in some of the bitterest fighting of the whole war.

By the morning of 22 November our 5 Brigade Group had captured **Fort Capuzzo** and taken 200 prisoners, without loss, in a night action. It also cut the water supply to **Halfaya**. Fourth Brigade Group passed **Sidi Azeiz** at midnight and pressed on to the escarpment, where it surprised a sleeping enemy camp. That morning (22 November) it cut the **Bardia-Tobruk** road, taking many prisoners. These moves drove a wedge into the enemy forces in **Cyrenaica** and severely hampered Rommel's activities. Meanwhile our 6 Brigade Group moved ten miles westward along the **Trigh Capuzzo** and came under command of **30 Corps**.

On 22 November Petrol Company, moving in convoy, passed groups of tanks with 4 Indian Division waiting for word to attack **Sidi Omar**; and Divisional Ammunition Company, on Petrol Company's right, had to 'step on it' as shells from the fortress burst among its vehicles. The same evening some Divisional Artillery trucks which had drawn petrol from our Company returned to report that they had run into a tank battle after travelling three miles. That night guards were doubled in the

Petrol Company area and our men were treated to a fireworks display as the skirmishing AFVs belted one another with streams of brilliant tracer. Next day Petrol Company reached its operational area near the **Trigh Capuzzo; and from then on its troubles came thick and fast.**

Many of these stemmed from the difficulties encountered by **30 Corps. For, while the operations of **13 Corps** had, as we have seen, all gone strictly according to plan, with further successes at **Musaid** and **Sollum** (captured by the Maoris on 23 November) Eighth Army's tanks in their battles farther west had not fared at all well; and reports received on 22 November made it appear to **General Freyberg** that 7 Armoured Division and its commander, General Gott, were then surrounded at **Sidi Rezegh**. Our GOC reacted with characteristic energy. He ordered the commander of 6 Brigade Group, already making good speed westward along the Trigh, to 'press on to **Sidi Rezegh**, start fighting, and get in touch with General Gott'. Plans were made at the same time to send 4 Brigade and part of the 5th (21 Battalion Group) with all speed westward in an advance on **Tobruk**. This advance was to be made on a two-brigade front; so the first aim was to concentrate 4 and 6 Brigade Groups. The bulk of 5 Brigade was to remain behind, with 4 Indian Division, to help contain the frontier forts.**

To further these plans some modification was needed in the supply system, which normally functioned on a Divisional basis, with our Petrol, Supply and Ammunition Companies under control of HQ NZASC. But when 6 Brigade Group moved westward, a Brigade Group Company comprising one section each from Petrol, Supply and Ammunition was formed to service it. A similar composite company now serviced 5 Brigade Group, left behind near the frontier. In this campaign, too, ASC companies drew their supplies from Field Maintenance Centres, a new set-up which, for the first time, provided a corps link in the supply chain. For identification purposes the FMCs were numbered, those for **30 Corps commencing with No. 60 and extending roughly westward from **Maddalena**; those for **13 Corps**, beginning with No. 50, were grouped nearer the coast.**

On 22 November, therefore, Petrol Company's Second-Lieutenant Bill Swarbrick, with A Section under command, was detached to form part of the composite Group Company to service 6 Brigade. Under instructions from Captain Roberts ¹⁵ (Divisional Supply Column) who was in charge of the Brigade Group Company, Swarbrick set out for 62 FMC to uplift petrol for delivery at Bir el Chleta. There the load would be issued to New Zealand units advancing along the Trigh Capuzzo, south of Gambut. Having given his orders, Roberts, with a loaded convoy, set out himself for Chleta.

He found the Germans still in possession of the Chleta area —well screened with tanks and guns, which promptly opened fire on him. So he was forced to return—too late to warn Swarbrick who, having loaded A Section at 62 FMC, was now somewhere out in the blue, heading for trouble. ¹⁶ This soon



FIELD MAINTENANCE CENTRES, NOVEMBER 1941

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became known to the young subaltern when bullets began whining among his vehicles and whipping up spurts of sand. So his convoy, also, smartly turned about, and made all haste southward, with enemy elements hard on their hammer.

The Hun was eventually shaken off, but not before one spare driver had tossed away his load of petrol to gain extra speed. In the race it was

observed that A Section's cook-truck easily led the field, despite the heavy handicap of a water-trailer on tow. And as the trailer bucked, pitched, rolled and plunged, it was also observed that a lone human figure (Driver **Calvert**, ¹⁷ alias 'the Count') was clinging desperately to the outside of it! And so the convoy escaped, without damage to men or vehicles, and with only one really nasty 'near miss' from an exploding tank-shell which showered 'Dilly' Dalton's truck with dust.

The section, less two vehicles which went their own separate ways in the scramble, did not return to the Company until noon on 26 November, and its absence caused much anxiety at Company Headquarters. For in the interim Major Forbes found himself with too few load-carriers on hand and the petrol situation for 5 Brigade Group in the **Bardia** sector beginning to deteriorate. This anxiety was by no means allayed by a report from one of the 'lone-star' drivers (who had managed to contact Second-Lieutenant Washbourn) that his vehicle was the only survivor from A Section, and that Swarbrick and all the rest had gone into the bag!

At 4 p.m. on 24 November, however, Second-Lieutenant May of Ammunition Company reported that Swarbrick, with A Section less the two missing trucks, had joined Ammunition Company in the forward area. They were detained there because of the tactical situation. May was instructed to return A Section to the Company area immediately.

Before this could be done, B Section under Second-Lieutenant Browne also came in for a brush with the enemy. On 23 November 'Brownie' had set off with about 10,000 gallons of petrol to make a dump and issue POL to our advancing brigades at Point 212 on the **Trigh Capuzzo**. But the brigades had not yet reached that point, and Jerry was lurking there instead. He seemed pretty surly over B Section's arrival, and signalled his displeasure with bursts of machine-gun and cannon fire from tanks hull down among the wadis.

The convoy turned tail, and some AFVs gave chase. But speed once again favoured the Company's vehicles, and B Section also managed to

break clear without casualties. Their relief, however, was short-lived, for soon the leading drivers saw several AFVs screening a large group of transport straight ahead. Enemy tanks behind them, AFVs in front. What chance now of escape? The convoy pulled up. Drivers reached for their rifles. But before they could use them an armoured car and a couple of Bren carriers, recognisable as 'some of ours', shot out from the group and accosted the convoy.

Second-Lieutenant Browne was taken along to **Colonel Kippenberger** (again in command of 20 Battalion) who asked some pertinent questions. What was the convoy doing out there in enemy territory? Why hadn't the lieutenant shaved that morning? Having satisfied the Colonel on these important points, Browne and his outfit were put under the wing of 20 Battalion, and that night enjoyed the luxury of tank protection, plus a sharp watch kept by B Section pickets. Next day the section joined a combined petrol, water, and supply point some three miles south of the **Trigh Capuzzo**. From there, petrol issues to the brigades proceeded.

While Browne and his convoy had been flirting with the enemy at Point 212, Second-Lieutenant Washbourn, back at Company Headquarters, was preparing to set out for the very same spot with thirteen petrol trucks from C Section. He departed with this convoy at 5.15 p.m., blissfully unaware of the events just related. Yet such were the fortunes of war that Washbourn reached Point 212 without seeing anyone (the enemy tanks had been chased off by then) and was puzzled at not finding B Section there. His convoy laagered for the night with drivers and 'spares' keeping a sharp watch. For the tactical situation then was decidedly tricky; and for all Washbourn knew, Browne and his B Section might have gone 'in the bag'.

At dawn C Section revved up their motors and headed eastward, soon making contact with B Section. After swapping experiences, with much mutual marvelling, Washbourn's drivers unloaded their petrol in the B Section area and returned to Company Headquarters. Next day (25 November) they set out under orders for 50 FMC, where they expected to reload. In the convoy were thirteen vehicles of 309 General Transport

Company (RASC), two trucks of our 27 (MG) Battalion, and a Ford V8 staff car for delivery at the FMC.

But all unwittingly, the C Section officer was leading his men into a trap. For, some two hours after the convoy's departure, word came through to Petrol Company headquarters that all was not well around 50 FMC. The whole area to the south, in fact, was now infested with enemy.

Washbourn got his first hint of trouble when Second-Lieutenant **Atkinson**¹⁸ driving the staff car at the rear of the convoy, reported that an Italian motor-cyclist had been nonchalantly riding some distance with us. When each woke up— apparently in the same instant—to the other's identity, the 'Itie' sped off, with Atkinson in pursuit. The chase led him into a small nest of Italians who opened fire, shooting a piece off the staff car's steering wheel and putting several holes in the driver-side door.

On receiving this news Washbourn halted the convoy and turned it about. In his 8-cwt runabout he then went forward to 'recce', accompanied by Atkinson in the V8, and leaving Sergeant **Williamson**¹⁹ in charge of the convoy.

The officers soon came on a most disquieting spectacle: a dozen British vehicles, including a Bren carrier, abandoned in a wadi. Not a soul in sight—yet the motors were still warm, including that of the carrier. Washbourn started it up and drove it around, with a view to salvage later. He then carried on with his reconnaissance, hoping to find a safe route to the FMC. Sounds of firing, far off to the right, persuaded him that the raiders had found other victims, which would probably keep them occupied while he got his trucks through.

Accompanied by Atkinson, he skirted the wadi and came upon a Moslem grave, with an armoured car drawn up alongside. Two more AFVs—one on either flank—were then seen to be closing in. There was nothing else for it; the two 'recce' vehicles turned tail and fled, followed by the AFVs and a lively stream of bullets.

Outstripping their pursuers, the two light vehicles made for the waiting convoy, whose drivers, alerted by the firing, were quick off the mark for a brisk helter-skelter back to the Company's lines. Laagered on the outskirts were the vehicles of D Section—a sitting target for AFVs. But the Hun, it is thought, mistook the sloping booms of the Workshops wreckers for artillery and shied off.

The return of this convoy, empty-handed, brought little joy to the Company's OC. Anxious over the petrol supply position, Forbes had been worried on the previous day by the non-return of his POL vehicles. By early afternoon of 24 November, detachments under charge of Second-Lieutenants Swarbrick, Browne and Washbourn were still out; and all petrol on the ground in the Company's area had been issued, mainly to units of 5 Brigade Group, still investing **Bardia**.

At 2.30 p.m., therefore, Forbes despatched Sergeant D. R. Plumtree, with the thirteen remaining vehicles from C Section and four from B Section, to uplift petrol from 50 FSD. Two hours later Washbourn reported in, after his night at Point 212 and his subsequent reunion with 'Brownie', with whom he had left his petrol for issue to the brigades. Washbourn was then briefed to follow Plumtree to 50 FSD for petrol next day—with the consequences already narrated. At 10 a.m. on 25 November, **13 Corps** Advanced Headquarters pulled into the Company's area after being chased by the enemy. Its vehicles needed petrol, but none was available until the load-carriers returned.

Washbourn's trucks, as we have seen, were chased back, empty, at 1 p.m. Sergeant Plumtree's were still away; and three hours later there was still no word concerning this detachment. But advice was received that enemy tanks had penetrated to, and shot up, the FSD. Plumtree's story is an exciting one, and will be told further on. Meanwhile, events at 50 FSD (where Plumtree and his convoy were *not*) are also worth brief mention.

This FSD lay just inside the Egyptian border, near the **El Beida** gap, through which the Division had passed, unchallenged, a week before.

But the area now was a 'no-man's land', for on 24 November Rommel had loosed a strong flying column in the general direction of his besieged frontier posts; and for the next four days the frontier area became a 'playground' for the entire *Africa Corps*, plus Italy's crack *Ariete Armoured Division*. One prong of the flying column, comprising *21 Panzer Division*, penetrated into Egypt south of the Omars and disrupted our lines of communication.

At one FMC, the story runs, German armour surprised the OC and his staff by arriving while they were still in bed. The major had the presence of mind to leap into his car and escape—still wearing pyjamas. From a safe distance he watched the invaders ravaging his supply dumps and rounding up prisoners. Then he tapped a telephone wire and relayed a running commentary to *13 Corps*, whose tanks and AFVs soon altered the situation. By early afternoon the FMC was again operating as usual.

Meanwhile Sergeant Plumtree with his seventeen Petrol Company vehicles had reached Point 187, some miles north of the *El Beida* gap, where he was halted, not by the enemy, but by an RMT convoy under Major Hood. The Major informed Plumtree that 50 FMC was in enemy hands and he advised the sergeant to tack on to the RMT convoy for a passage through the Wire. They could then seek petrol wherever it might be found on the Egyptian side of the border. Major Hood added that as the *El Beida* gap was not likely to prove too healthy at that moment, he intended crossing at *Sheferzen*, farther north.

This was accomplished towards evening, and the convoy, now a very mixed one, with the RMT trucks carrying large swags of prisoners, nosed on through the night, continually stopping and starting as suspicious sounds or sights spelt danger. At breakfast time the vehicles drew up in rows about fifty yards apart, with the seventeen Petrol Company vehicles ranged on one flank. In the centre were the trucks carrying prisoners. Suddenly, over a nearby ridge, came a number of German Army vehicles. They drew up level with the rear of Plumtree's section and opened fire.

Our drivers dived for cover under their trucks. Further down the line

a few shots rang out. The prisoners broke from the RMT vehicles and streamed towards the attackers, many being mown down by the bullets of their compatriots. Seeing this, the attacking Germans then held their fire, leaping from their vehicles with levelled automatics, and calling on the convoy to surrender. But Petrol Company men near the head of the column did not wait to obey. Rallied by Sergeant Plumtree, Corporal **Jenkin**,²⁰ and Drivers **Perston**²¹ and Lloyd Jones, they crammed into the leading lorries and took off at high speed.

Jones relates: 'I was driving the leading vehicle with Jenkin when we made a break for it, while Plumtree and his driver followed. German AFV's attempted to outflank us on both sides, but we managed to escape through the centre of the converging columns, although our trucks were hit several times. Jenkin was on the tray, and he succeeded in tying a piece of rag high above the canopy and the rest of the escaping vehicles followed this until we were out of range and able to re-organize at an old Italian fort.'

Seven Petrol Company trucks got away, with thirty-five assorted soldiery, including Tommies, Indians and even a few Germans. Maybe the war looked better to them from our side of the fence—or perhaps they saw more future in being prisoners of war. Meanwhile the marauders surrounded the main convoy; and into the bag went Petrol Company's Corporal Ray Whitehouse, with Drivers Noel Bryant, Reg Depper, Lance Emery, 'Shorty' Fitzsimmons, Doug Hutchison, Jock McWilliam, Bert Ramsay, A. L. Simmons, I. V. Lord, Len Symes, Walshe, 'Rosy' Wilson and several others.²²

Back at Petrol Company headquarters a harassed OC, bereft of many vehicles and at his wits' end to know where to find the petrol so urgently needed by the Division, had his troubles increased by an order to shift camp, since the Company area, also, was menaced by enemy raiders. This meant a night move, by compass, to a location just beyond Maurie Browne's section near Point 212. Major Forbes describes the move:

It was fortunate that I had previously been over the ground and was

able to avoid in the dark a number of wet salt marshes. As it got later, flares and Very-lights were going up all round us; and at one stage, when we made a brief halt, still more flares went up, less than half a mile ahead. We carried on, and at the prescribed mileage came across Browne's dump of petrol on the ground.

But of Maurie Browne and his trucks there was no sign whatever; and although scouts were sent out for some distance around, he



Indians unload petrol from a lighter at Bardia

Indians unload petrol from a lighter at Bardia

Tobruk, December 1942



Tobruk, December 1942



Convoy arrives at Saunnu, December 1942

Convoy arrives at Saunnu, December 1942

Padre Holland conducts a church service on the beach at Nofilia on Christmas Day, 1942



Padre Holland conducts a church service on the beach at Nofilia on Christmas Day, 1942



14 Section with their workshop truck outside Tripoli, March 1943

14 Section with their workshop truck outside Tripoli, March 1943



On the edge of the Sahara

On the edge of the Sahara



Maurie Smylie produces a batch of scones, April 1943

Maurie Smylie produces a batch of scones, April 1943

could not be located. This was very disturbing, since we did not know whether Browne had been ‘collected’ or merely chased away. We then carried on for another two or three miles, and just about daybreak hit the exact spot allotted to us by Division. We had more anxious moments shortly afterwards when armoured cars, hull down and with turrets closed, were seen towards the south. But they proved to be elements of **22nd Armoured Brigade which had been shadowing us all night.**

Full daylight disclosed no other vehicles at all in that vicinity— no Div HQ trucks, which were supposed to be there—nothing but the empty

desert. I again sent off scouts to look for Maurie Browne, and was amazed to learn that they found him—back with his dumps of petrol! It turned out that when he had heard us approaching during the night he thought we were an armoured column, and decided it was better to be out of the way.

But the most extraordinary thing was that the flares and Very lights we had seen turned out to be those of the Ariete Division, which had laagered for the night directly across our path. But they, too, mistook us for an armoured column, and dispersed into the desert. We had gone clean through the middle of them!

Research establishes that the *Ariete Division* was, at this time, quite a few miles away; so it must have been some detachments of that division that we scared off. But with Rommel's flying column lashing about, the situation was very confused, with mistaken identity common on both sides.

Yet with all these and other trials and difficulties, Petrol Company, performing for the first time its true wartime function, succeeded in keeping the Division fuelled and fully mobile. At no time during this campaign was an operational plan modified by shortage of POL—an achievement indeed in a battle area 100 miles long and 60 miles deep, with the tactical situation almost constantly 'fluid'. An average of more than 20,000 gallons of oil-fuel and some five tons of lubricants were replenished daily, with some issues exceeding, as we have seen, 28,000 gallons a day.

Nevertheless, as 4 and 6 Brigades fought their way doggedly westward, and the German flying columns harried our L of C, the task of supplying the brigades with ammunition, rations and POL became increasingly difficult. Unescorted convoys, out of touch, while on the move, with a situation which was changing from hour to hour, were altogether too liable to be held up or diverted. Some more comprehensive system of co-ordinated and protected supply trains was needed, but this could not be improvised at a moment's notice; and it was a difficulty

which the enemy, too, had yet to solve.

By 25 November, **General Freyberg** noted, convoys were not reaching 4 and 6 Brigades, and their supply situation was really serious. Twenty-five pounder ammunition was short, the supply being reduced to sixty rounds per gun, with no more in sight. Emergency arrangements had been made to drop supplies from the air, but it was clear that a corridor into **Tobruk** would have to be opened. Not only supplies were needed. We also required somewhere to send many hundreds of wounded, our mass of surplus transport, and almost a thousand German prisoners.

The fighting had by this time developed into a battle for the three escarpments south-east of **Tobruk**, terraced back from the sea to the main desert plateau 16 miles inland. These three escarpments were like steps ascending from north to south, three to four miles apart, and rising from 140 metres to 170 and the most southerly to 190 metres. Although the escarpments were not tank proof, they were a strong deterrent to tanks. Their main strength lay in their value as infantry strongpoints in the deep wadis and, of course, for their artillery observation.

Orders were issued on the afternoon of the 25th for a general advance, 4 Brigade (18 and 20 Battalions) to capture **Belhamed** and 6 Brigade (24 and 25 Battalions) to take **Sidi Rezegh**, while 21 and 26 Battalions were to go on to **Ed Duda**. The **Tobruk** garrison was to break out and join up there at daylight or earlier on the morning of the 26th. The advance was to be by night with the bayonet, the I tanks following in support.

The progress of those moves cannot be followed here; but the outcome, of course, is now well known. On the night of 26-27 November, New Zealand's 19 Battalion, supported by armour of 44 Royal Tank Regiment, advanced 10,000 yards to **Ed Duda** and joined hands with troops of Tobforce who had pushed a salient out from the fortress. It was 'almost like a triumphal march, without any casualties'—a very different story from that of 4 and 6 Brigades, both of which had been and were to

be involved further in fierce fighting, with both brigades suffering and inflicting heavy casualties.

Then came the urgent business of getting the ASC, and a mass of other transport, through the narrow corridor and into **Tobruk** before the expected counter-attacks developed. These would employ tanks and heavy artillery, which would make short work of our soft-skinned vehicles.

On the night of 27-28 November Petrol Company laagered only four miles away from Rommel's *15 Panzer Division*. It was some consolation to know that the British 22 Armoured Brigade was also handy; but the chance of being involved in a battle of these giants was anything but pleasant. Fortunately, both armoured groups spent that night repairing their tanks; and the clank of iron could be clearly heard by Petrol Company drivers making their own unofficial 'recces'.

At eight o'clock next morning 22 Armoured Brigade advised that a tank battle was imminent, and that it would be fought over the ground then held by Petrol Company. One enemy column was already in view, advancing from the east, and shells began bursting among the Company's vehicles. These took off quickly to the south. An hour later our column was ordered by HQ NZASC to proceed to a position north of the escarpment and the **Trigh Capuzzo**; and again Petrol Company shifted, spurred on by fire from enemy tanks.

This move brought the Company, at 2 p.m., to Point 175, in the rear of 6 Brigade's B Echelon. Here the Company was once more ordered off, as the ridge was under observation and within range of enemy guns. Shells were seen landing in the area we had expected to occupy. So our column then travelled east along the ridge to another position, which was reached at 4 p.m. There Petrol Company watched a lively tank battle to the south, the German armour no doubt being that which had harried the Company's flank in the morning.

At 6.30 p.m. the Company received orders to stand by for a move

into **Tobruk**, and some three hours later a huge convoy, led by Headquarters **13 Corps** and comprising the whole of Supply, Ammunition and Petrol Companies, plus Divisional Ordnance Workshops, nosed forward uncertainly into the darkness. That journey was a nightmare, with interminable stops and startings, and worn-out drivers falling asleep or losing contact with the trucks in front. No one seemed to know the route the drivers were supposed to take, and at one stage the whole column, now in single file, found itself going round and round in a vast circle.

At 5 a.m. Major Forbes halted his Company and tried to find out where the entrance was to the gap through the minefields. He knew that all vehicles had to be off the road leading into **Tobruk** by 6 a.m., since the Hun regularly shelled it at daybreak; and a convoy like ours, silhouetted on the skyline, would offer a heaven-sent target. There was also much movement of other vehicles at that time, Forbes recalls, with comings and goings in various directions, all adding to the confusion.

Finally the OC made contact with a British unit which seemed to know the score. They produced an NCO who said he could lead the Company to the taped entrance to the minefield. He sat on the mudguard of the OC's vehicle and they set off just as day was breaking. 'But the Tommy', Forbes relates, 'had not the faintest notion where the entrance was. We headed towards what turned out to be the forward line of our own defences facing east, and were promptly chased out. Eventually we decided to trust to luck. We sent the Tommy back home to his unit, and carried on by ourselves until we found the tank ditch.'

The Company negotiated that just after daylight on 29 November, and sharp at 6 a.m., shells started to burst among our vehicles. There was a terrific skelter as trucks scattered in all directions—but we were through. Petrol Company had made **Tobruk**. A collection centre was established at a road and track junction. Many orders and counter-orders were received from British staff as to our subsequent location, and by 3 p.m. they eventually settled on where the Company was to disperse. One B Section truck and one from C Section ran over anti-tank mines while

moving to the dispersal area. Sergeant Gordon Williamson was sitting on the front mudguard of one of the trucks blown up, but apart from a shaking, and a slight gravel rash on his bottom, he suffered no ill effects.

The damaged vehicles were extricated by MSM Williams and a party from Workshops. That section, owing to the late arrival of a movement order, had tailed the main convoy, eventually running through enemy fire to reach **Tobruk** shortly after the rest of the Company. They came in minus their OC, Captain 'Hank' Torbet, who had stayed behind—not entirely voluntarily—to dicker with the enemy. The story of his capture and subsequent escape (he rejoined the Company before the day was through) is appended.

By 8.30 a.m. next day Petrol Company were at work again, loading their vehicles. By midday 26,058 gallons of petrol, with a ratio of oils and lubricants, had been picked up from dumps within the fortress, ready for delivery to Divisional units still fighting outside the perimeter. Sharing the Company area was a British heavy battery which kept up a noisy and intermittent fire by day and by night. At 11 p.m. a large convoy was seen entering **Tobruk** from the direction of **Bardia**— and from it emerged Sergeant Plumtree with his seven Petrol Company vehicles. Once again the Company was united, and practically intact. The campaign, so far, had been a tough one; but for Petrol Company at any rate, the end was in sight.

Captain Torbet describes his own adventures:

The tail end of the NZASC column—which included Petrol Company's D Section—was caught in daylight. The enemy seemed just as confused as we were, but as soon as he realised that British transport was moving through the Corridor, he opened fire with artillery, rifles and machine guns. My station wagon was obviously being sniped at.

Soon I noticed a Workshops wagon, with a staff car on tow, making heavy going. The car was Col Crump's Chev, which had broken down

during the night. The coupled vehicles were some distance to the rear; and I realised that if they didn't get a wriggle on they would both be shot up. I was concerned that they might miss the tapes marking the lane through the mine fields.

MSM Williams (the senior NCO) was following the workshop section in through the gap. He asked for instructions and destination. I could only tell him to follow the column. Then I jumped from my own car and ordered the driver to go on with the others, saying: 'I'll jump onto that hook-wagon'. But before I could do so, the coupled vehicles zoomed past, well wide, and I was left stranded.

At the time I was wearing only shorts, shirt, sox, boots and gaiters. My battledress jacket was in the car, along with my cap, belt, pistol and paybook. There was nothing about me to give a clue as to my rank or unit ... no pips or shoulder-tabs. Soon a motor-cycle outfit, mounting a machine-gun, bowled up and collected me, and I was taken to a German artillery post.

There I played dumb, and asked for water, cigarettes, the Red Cross ... anything I could think of ... in answer to their questions, which were put in English. They were pretty busy in that artillery post, and soon gave up. At noon I was given some ersatz sausage, and bread in a cellophane wrapper. I slipped this wrapper into my pocket, saying I wanted it for toilet purposes. It was date-stamped ' **Munich**, November 10'.

That afternoon things got really hot in the artillery post, with telephones buzzing, runners coming and going, guns roaring. Then our own artillery got our range, with shells lobbing close, and the air filled with billows of dust and smoke. Nobody took much notice of me, so I waited my chance, and about 5.30 made a dash for it. There was a slight rise immediately in front of the gun position so I was soon out of sight. I kept on running for about five miles, when I picked up an **RAF** truck, driven by a Cypriot. It was now quite dark. I asked if he was going into **Tobruk**, and he said 'Yes' so I hopped aboard—bumping and bouncing

over the desert on a truckload of mines!

Soon we struck the **Tobruk- Bardia Road**, and I said that that would do me. I hopped out and inquired for the New Zealanders. I was told that they were 'just down the road' so I walked along and the first Kiwi I met was Stan Forbes! He was bedded down, it was now almost 2100 hrs. He had saved up a bottle of beer for some weeks. We shared it.

¹ Lt E. A. Collins.

² Maj G. S. Forbes, MBE, ED; **Auckland**; born **Christchurch**, 29 Jul 1908; insurance clerk; OC Pet Coy Jun 1941- Apr 1944.

³ Capt M. G. Browne, m.i.d.; **Wellington**; born South Africa, 28 Sep 1913; clerk.

⁴ Capt L. D. Hastie; **Dunedin**; born NZ 9 Jan 1905; salesman.

⁵ Capt W. A. Swarbrick; born NZ 6 Dec 1917; clerk; died 12 May 1951.

⁶ WO I E. E. Wallace; **London**; born **Christchurch**, 26 Aug 1901; motor proprietor.

⁷ Maj W. A. G. Washbourn, m.i.d.; **Napier**; born **Richmond**, 18 Jul 1915; accountant; OC Pet Coy Jul 1944-Feb 1945; wounded 3 Jun 1944.

⁸ Maj C. M. Torbet, OBE, ED, m.i.d.; **Auckland**; born **Wanganui**, 19 Dec 1909; motor engineer.

⁹ 2 Lt L. N. Cording; **Wellington**; born **Wellington**, 21 Mar 1917; accountant; wounded 17 Jul 1942.

¹⁰ **Dvr J. W. Clare; born NZ 23 Nov 1905; motor driver; died on active service 29 Aug 1941.**

¹¹ **Capt D. Chapman; born NZ 14 Aug 1914; company secretary.**

¹² *Infantry Brigadier*, p. 84.

¹³ **Sgt J. Jensen; Paeroa; born Denmark, 21 Jan 1908; school teacher.**

¹⁴ **Lt-Col O. Bracegirdle, DSO, ED, m.i.d.; Auckland; born Auckland, 14 Aug 1911; clerk; 2 i/c HQ Comd NZASC Nov 1943-Jun 1945.**

¹⁵ **Maj L. W. Roberts, MBE, ED, m.i.d.; Auckland; born Wellington, 4 Sep 1911; clerk; OC 2 Amn Coy 1943; 1 Sup Coy Oct 1945-Jan 1946; now Regular soldier.**

¹⁶ **Washbourn remarks that many of Petrol Company's troubles at this stage were due to the fact that our Company, like others of the NZASC, had no means of radio communication, nor were they receiving situation reports. He himself relied on the BBC news broadcasts, which were very brief, and at least twelve hours old. Nor were they always particularly accurate.**

¹⁷ **Sgt J. W. P. Calvert; Waihi; born Christchurch, 25 Jun 1911; motor driver.**

¹⁸ **Lt L. M. Atkinson; Christchurch; born NZ 18 Dec 1912; storeman driver.**

¹⁹ **Sgt G. S. Williamson; born Gore, 13 Oct 1913; bus driver.**

²⁰ **Sgt J. M. Jenkin; Masterton; born Masterton, 19 Jul 1915; mechanic.**

²¹ **Sgt R. C. Perston; Wairoa; born NZ 11 Apr 1915; truck driver.**

²² **Next day the prisoners overpowered their guards and escaped. After a 20-mile hike, by night, across the desert, they eventually reached 4 Indian Division headquarters near **Conference Cairn**. They rejoined their unit at **Fuka** on 10 December.**

PETROL COMPANY

CHAPTER 10 – SYRIAN INTERLUDE

CHAPTER 10

Syrian Interlude

WHEN Petrol Company crawled from their bivvies in **Tobruk** on Monday, 1 December, they found the rear of their area occupied by a large concentration of vehicles. These had come in during the night from 4 and 6 NZ Brigades, still fighting desperately on the ridges outside the fortress. The enemy was mounting heavy counter-attacks, with massed armour, in an effort to drive a wedge into the forces protecting the **Tobruk Corridor**. But the much-talked-of Corridor, which the Division had been ordered to hold at all cost, and which at that stage was of little actual use to our cause, was doomed.

So, too, it seemed, was the remnant of our two New Zealand brigade groups, which had been badly mauled in the fighting and were virtually surrounded. Their only hope was to break out. On the night of 30 November-1 December **General Freyberg** had sent all transport and personnel not essential to this operation through the Corridor into the fortress. Late in the afternoon of 1 December, he sent the following signal to **13 Corps**:

Remnants New Zealand Division concentrated at **Zaafran** 4340 and after dark will attempt to break out in direction of B. Bu Deheua 4836. If unsuccessful will attempt break out West. Have made contact with Norrie, who is helping.

This move is best described in the GOC's own words: ¹

All guns, transport, and equipment which could be moved were brought away. The columns assembled East of **Zaafran**, with 4th Brigade in the lead, followed by the skeleton Divisional Headquarters and then **6th Brigade**, covered by a rearguard of our remaining 'I' Tanks. Despite the decided pressure of the evening attacks the units disengaged and in the dusk our withdrawal began, first to the East and then South on to the escarpment. The intervening area had been patrolled by elements of the Armoured Brigade. General Norrie awaited us on the escarpment,

giving us final directions before moving off to cover our further withdrawal. In the early hours of the morning we reached **Bir Gibni**, the whole move having been accomplished with an uncanny ease no less remarkable than the withdrawals in **Greece**....

So ended the New Zealand part of the battle to keep the **Tobruk** Corridor open. This battle in the **Western Desert** was not primarily however a battle to hold positions, but a battle to destroy the German forces. I believe we went some distance towards achieving this in our attacks at **Sidi Rezegh**, **Belhamed**, and **Ed Duda**. I think the German Afrika Korps will bear me out in this!

Meanwhile, inside **Tobruk** Petrol Company settled down to life in yet another role: that of a beleaguered garrison. The afternoon of 1 December was spent by the sections in effecting maximum dispersal, northwards to the sea. POL was loaded, vehicle maintenance attended to; rations and water were drawn—a sour and brackish water which curdled the milk in tea. Bread came on the menu again; and also, as our drivers began to find their way around, sundry other items not listed in the official ration scale. These ‘extras’ increased noticeably when working parties from the Company were detailed to unload ships in **Tobruk** harbour. And it must be admitted that many a case of jam, fruit, milk, cigarettes, or fancy biscuits intended for some **NAAFI** or officers’ mess mysteriously failed to reach its destination. Also side-tracked were sundry jars of potent overproof rum—a wonderful ‘warmer-upper’, our drivers found, when bleak winds blew in from the desert, and on those wintry **Tobruk** nights which seemed as cold as any they had experienced in **Greece** or in England.

By 3 December **Tobruk**'s eastern perimeter and the **Bardia** road were still invested by the enemy; and on that day Colonel Crump advised NZASC commanders that their personnel and equipment would possibly be evacuated by sea. For the **Tobruk** garrison was seriously short of transport, and our vehicles were to be handed over. The prospect of a sea evacuation was scarcely a happy one at that time, when enemy submarines haunted the coastline and Stukas frequently dive-bombed

shipping in **Tobruk** harbour. On 5 December a particularly heavy air-raid commenced about 11 a.m. and continued for some hours, exciting the formidable **Tobruk** barrage (including the guns in the Company's area) to noisy and continuous activity. On that day, also, Petrol Company lost another good fellow, Driver **Henderson**,² who had sustained a foot wound and was being sent back to Egypt by sea. His ship was sunk by enemy action and many men lost their lives.

At this time the **Tobruk** barrage was intense, and rumour had it that *Luftwaffe* pilots who, for some reason, came 'under a cloud' were detailed for service over **Tobruk**. Whatever the truth of that, the Germans made no bones about attacking the fortress which they bombed wholeheartedly at dawn and sunset, with odd raids, for good measure, in between. Fighter planes, too, were active in the area, and Petrol Company drivers watched many a thrilling dogfight. Those working on the ships were far from thrilled (in any pleasant sense) by these persistent visits; so perhaps they felt entitled to the odd bit of 'klefity', as a kind of dirt money! Between times our drivers dug and occupied slit trenches, well away from the petrol-carriers, which were kept loaded, each with its 640 highly inflammable gallons. No trucks were lost, however, and no casualties suffered by the Company as a result of the raids. With our drivers, dispersal, cover and camouflage had by now become second nature.

On 5 December Captain Torbet and his Workshops Section inspected all Petrol Company vehicles and found them to be in sound mechanical order. Two days later, all vehicles except 1 30-cwt, 1 Stores, 1 Workshops and 2 motor-cycles were taken over by 16 Brigade Group Company, RASC, and notice was received by Major Forbes to prepare his Company to move out. Evacuation from **Tobruk** was now feasible by land routes, since the enemy, beaten to a standstill, was making all haste westward.

At 8 a.m. on 8 December, transport from Divisional Ammunition Company arrived in the Petrol Company lines to uplift HQ and D

Sections. The remainder, numbering 149 other ranks, with Second-Lieutenant Swarbrick in charge, and Second-Lieutenants Browne and Washbourn, were to remain in **Tobruk** for work under direction of the AA & QMG, **70 Division**. At 12.10 p.m. the departing convoy left the camp area, together with **Rear Divisional Headquarters**, taking the **Bardia** road. They then proceeded via **Bir el Chleta** and **Bir Gibni** to El Rabta, where they staged for the night. Rabta was reached at 6 p.m., with 87 miles covered. Next day the convoy made 119 miles, reaching Qaret el **Kanayis** at 5 p.m. On 10 December it struck north to the **Siwa** Track, and then travelled via Charing Cross to **Fuka**, where the Company halted at 5 p.m. on their old camp area. They were joined there by Corporal Stewart with personnel and three trucks, also by Corporal **Whitehouse**³ and sixteen other ranks who had managed to escape from German captivity.

Next day, exactly a month after leaving their once neat and orderly camp at **Fuka**, HQ and D Sections set about cleaning up the mess which had ensued in their absence. This took several days; and in that time our men received and read large quantities of mail; opened mountains of parcels; gorged, from their contents, on cake and *café au lait*; washed their socks; and again enjoyed the luxury of an adequate water-supply. Above all they enjoyed the sudden blissful quiet of life there at **Fuka**, far from the alarms and excursions of war.

Meanwhile the **Tobruk** detachment, comprising Petrol Company's A, B, and C Sections, was built up on 8 December by groups from Divisional Supply Column and Divisional Ammunition Company to a total strength of 184. Their role was to take over from the Polish ASC in the **Tobruk** fortress area, and they expected to receive Polish transport; but this proved unfit to hand over.

Next day Second-Lieutenant Swarbrick set up his headquarters in the transit camp at Wadi Ada together with Maurie Browne, Sergeant Les Cording, Corporal Claude **Hardaker**⁴ (as quartermaster), and Driver 'Johnnie' **Bull**⁵ as orderly-room clerk. The following details were then allocated:

| | | | |
|----------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|---------------|
| Petrol DID | 16 ORs | Palestrine Rd AP | 6 ORs |
| Petrol Depot | 12 ORs | Derna Rd AP | 6 ORs |
| Transit Sheds | 1 Officer | Bardia Rd AP | 8 ORs |
| | 23 ORs | 501 AOD | 13 ORs |
| 62 Gen Hosp | 21 ORs (Driving) | | |
| 500 AOD | 3 ORs (Driving) | | |

The transit sheds party, under Second-Lieutenant Washbourn, and the transit camp party were both self-contained. The whole detachment came under orders of the DAAG, **70 Division** (Major James) who, on 10 December, required two further allocations: 1 sergeant (Ken Bailey) and 44 other ranks to **9 BSD**; 1 NCO (Corporal **Day**⁶) and 14 other ranks to establish a salvage depot on the **El Adem** road. These groups, also, were to be self-contained; but as the detachment could muster only three cooks and three sets of cooking gear, an administrative hitch resulted. It was overcome by appointing Jim Ottaway as cook for Corporal Day's group, and drawing cooking and other gear from **500 AOD**.

On 11 December Swarbrick was advised that his transit camp would receive all New Zealanders discharged from **62 General Hospital**; so next day he drew extra clothing and equipment from **500 AOD**, as the majority of hospital evacuees were without equipment and had no spare clothing. With these men coming and going the ration strength showed considerable fluctuation, being approximately 220 on 14 December. The detachment's war diary bears the laconic entry: '15 to 18 Dec 41. Personnel marched in and out', with a similar entry for 22 December.

At **Fuka**, parades and squad drill recommenced on 15 December. That night heavy rain overflowed the wadis and filled the men's dugouts with cold muddy water—no good at all for sleeping in. Drenched and shivering, the washed-out drivers crammed into the orderly room, which, though leaking badly, still had some dry spots. Daylight revealed a scene of chaos, and more days had to be spent cleaning up again. In the midst of all this, the GOC's car arrived at Workshops for overhaul, showing the scars of several near misses.

On 17 December the Company acquired Second-Lieutenant Sam **Burkitt**,⁷ who marched in with smiling face and bright personality from NZASC Base Training Depot. He replaced as HQ subaltern Second-Lieutenant D. Chapman, posted on 18 December to NZ Base Supply Depot, from which strategic position the enterprising officer sortied, some three months later, to marry a New Zealand nursing sister (Miss Dorothy Waters) of 2 General Hospital. Petrol Company's Maurie Browne was best man.

In **Tobruk** the various NZASC details were gradually replaced by pioneer labour and returned to Swarbrick's transit camp headquarters. On 25 December eighty-eight Petrol Company and attached personnel marched out to the **El Adem** transit camp. Swarbrick remained at his headquarters and Washbourn's party, also, stayed on the job at the transit sheds. By 29 December all had moved down to **Misheifa**, where they entrained next day for **Fuka**.

The routine there was mostly drill and digging—Major Forbes seems to have tapped an endless supply of sandbags, all inconveniently empty—and rebuilding after rain and floods. Workshops, as usual, were working flat out on the overhaul of vehicles, which now poured in from various units, and on repairs to transport salvaged from the battle areas. D Section also compiled a list of all vehicles of affiliated units lost or damaged by enemy action. The three New Zealand Field Ambulances appeared the hardest hit.

Christmas Day brought a festive touch, despite cold winds, and heavy rain the day before, when tents were erected to make a combined mess for D Section, HQ, and attached personnel. This needed four EIPs placed end to end; but all the men were housed at one sitting, with the officers and sergeants serving the meals. Christmas dinner (for many the second one eaten away from home) was, of course, the major item. The menu proved substantial, and satisfying even to the stoutest appetites. Before the meal concluded, Colonel Crump paid a visit to extend his personal Christmas greetings, and to praise the work the Company had

done during the campaign in **Libya**. No beer was procurable thereabouts at that time, but there was much good spirit (plus a small amount of **Tobruk** rum) in evidence among the men.

And so the year ended, with the Company reunited and virtually intact, but minus most of its vehicles. By that time the enemy had been chased across **Cyrenaica**, and had dug in at **Agedabia**. **Benghazi** was in British hands, and almost all units of the New Zealand Division had been withdrawn to Egypt. The Old Year was speeded on its way by a spontaneous bombardment of nothing in particular, which the New Zealanders made so willing that a neighbouring Tommy unit, convinced we were being attacked, offered to send help. Last entry in Petrol Company's war diary for 1941 records: 'One OR marched in from **Field Punishment Centre, Daba**'.

Within a week the Company was packing up again, this time for a move to **Fayid**, on the **Suez** Canal. Meanwhile, on 2 January 1942, Bill Swarbrick was promoted captain and posted to 6 NZ Reserve MT Company. He was replaced, later on, by Captain **Latimer**.⁸ On 7 January, Sergeants D. R. Plumtree and L. N. Cording marched out to NZASC Base Training Depot, on their way to OCTU. The same day Major Forbes, with QM and Store, proceeded to **Fayid**. On 8 January, a fine clear day, the remainder of Petrol Company moved off in two groups, HQ and D Section (towing salvaged vehicles) travelling by road, and A, B, and C Sections leaving **Fuka** station by rail at 11 p.m. These groups arrived at **Fayid** on 9 and 10 January respectively, and next day all ranks were fully occupied settling in.

By 12 January the Company had shaken down again to life in yet another base camp, and a start was made on 'refresher training'. The daily routine ran as follows:

| | |
|-----------|--|
| 0630 | Reveille |
| 0645 | Sick Parade |
| 0730 | Breakfast |
| 0830-1130 | Company Parade, followed by training as per syllabus |

1200 Lunch
1330-1430 Training
1430-1630 Recreational Training
1700 Tea
1730 Retreat
1745 Changing of the Guard
2215 Tattoo
2250 Lights Out

It will be seen that the Company, now planted rather self-consciously in a Tommy base area, had suddenly gone ‘all regimental’, a change not relished after months of field and operational work. One man wrote in a letter home: ‘It always amazes me why there should be so many rules and regulations in these areas when one knows their true value. I suppose some blokes have to justify their existence in swell base jobs and pour out screeds of stuff so that they appear very efficient. Slit trenches will be dug and of such-and-such a length etc, fire buckets will be outside each tent and a fire picquet will be posted etc. etc. Gee, it makes me mad! Have started off on “one stop two” again and all that goes with it. Fortunately there is plenty of spare ground near us and we have started making Rugby, Soccer and cricket grounds, so we should get a bit of sport.’

And so, for two months, the dull record continues: company parades, followed by squad drill, and ‘other forms of training’. Route marches. Weapon training, including ‘refresher courses’ in holding, aiming and firing the rifle—the ‘trainees’ including men who had been on active service for over two years, and had taken part in several campaigns! Others, however, lacked such experience, and training must, of course, continue. Sport and lectures helped to relieve the tedium of a distinctly dismal period and to keep the men's minds from dwelling too much on affairs in the **Pacific. For by now the Japanese, after their ‘king hit’ at **Pearl Harbour**, were strongly on the march and were menacing—though still from a distance—our own home shores. There was naturally some heart-searching by our men, especially when it became known that Australian forces in the **Middle East** were being withdrawn.**

The camp area at **Kabrit** was bare and uninviting, and much exposed to frequent high winds. 'We had another stinking sandstorm a couple of nights ago', writes Second-Lieutenant Browne in a letter home, 'and once again my tent was flattened. This time it was a hot wind, and as I spent a good couple of hours outside trying to save the tent by lashing in the pegs, you can imagine what I looked like. I was perspiring like hell and as the air was full of dust I was covered all over in a sort of light cement mixture. You can imagine my language!'

Diversions were provided by leave to **Ismailia**, by occasional visits from the **YMCA** mobile cinema and the Kiwi Concert Party. The usual crop of rumours sprouted when New Zealand infantry units from neighbouring camp areas began to practise landing operations, including rowing, the use of scaling ladders, and embarking and disembarking from assault landing craft. All kinds of moves and destinations were predicted, though few tipsters actually picked the right horse.

Another topic of interest was provided about then by the turbulent state of Egyptian politics. These became so troublesome that, at the beginning of February, the British authorities in Egypt decided that in the interests of law and order they would have to take a hand. Accordingly, on 2 February 6 Brigade was moved into **Cairo** and the battalions posted at strategic points. Two days later the British Ambassador entered Abdin Palace and presented King Farouk with an ultimatum stating that he must either co-operate with the British forces or abdicate. Helped by the sight of tanks around his palace, Farouk quickly had a change of heart and agreed to call on the leader of the **Wafdist Party** (**Nahas Pasha**) to form a new government. Thereafter civil disturbances died down, and the British could get on with their war in peace.

On 25 January WO II Wallace (Petrol Company's GSM) marched out to Base Reception Depot for reboarding. He was replaced a month later by WO I A. B. Cooper, Staff-Sergeant **Quilter** ⁹ acting in the meantime. During the morning of 2 February **Major-General Freyberg** and party paid

a visit to Workshops to commend the men who had fitted out his new office lorry, which soon became the envy of high-ranking British officers. Captain Torbet was absent on duty at the time, but the GOC left a message congratulating him on the good work done, and expressing his thanks to all concerned. On 9 February, thirty reinforcements marched in, followed by nine the next day. These were needed to bring the Company up to strength for a proposed new establishment. On 10 February Sergeant K. A. Bailey was posted to NZASC Base, preparatory to entering OCTU.

For Workshops Section (or *Platoon* as it became under the new establishment) the **Kabrit** period proved less frustrating. Tradesmen and technicians toiled like beavers; and their lines, strewn with the innards of mangled and dismembered vehicles, looked like something between a wrecker's yard and the proverbial 'dog's breakfast'. But gradually the mass of miscellaneous haulage was sorted up and assembled, checked and overhauled, then issued as war-worthy to various units. The Division at that time was acutely short of transport, our own Company having on charge, by 15 February, only 2 motor-cycles, 5 3-ton lorries, 1 Technical Stores vehicle, and 1 Technical Workshops. Besides these we had temporarily on charge three Lancia 10-ton (diesel) lorries, one of which was issued, on 24 February, to GHQ Middle East.

Soon, however, new transport came to hand, including 100 motor-cycles drawn from 15 VRD. Petrol Company's quota was twenty of these, issued early in March. A few days later the Company also drew forty brand-new Bedford 30-cwt tipper trucks from 9 VRD. (These were issued temporarily until three-tonners were available to replace those left behind in **Tobruk**.) So, at last, Divisional Petrol was again mobile; and no one was sorry, when, at 7.30 a.m. on 14 March, the Company moved out from its windy, dusty home near the Big Lake.

Staff-Sergeant Asher, with two other ranks as issuers, had already gone, nine days earlier, to take over a petrol point at Nebi Othmane, in **Syria**. And soon it became known that that historic land was to be the Division's future home 'Our start', writes Major Forbes in his personal

diary, 'was early in the crisp atmosphere which Egypt can produce in the failing winter months, and after sundry delays the snaking column was collected on the eastern bank and really started on our long trip.'

Slow progress was made in the approach to the pontoon bridge over the **Suez Canal**. At 10.15 a.m. a hold-up on the bridge itself again brought the convoy to a halt. Forbes then sent the cook trucks ahead to El Aweigla to get a meal ready for the arriving troops. By 11.45 the convoy was moving again, and thereafter made better speed. Its way lay across the storied **Sinai Desert**, where New Zealanders had fought the Turks in World War I. 'It is quite different from the Egyptian Western Desert', one lad wrote, 'as there are big drifts of sand stretching for miles, undulating, and just like the pictures one sees at home with camels walking along and leaving their footprints. There are miles and miles of this sort of country, and the black bitumen road stretching right through it makes a great contrast.'

At some places that bitumen was in bad repair; at others it was covered deep with soft sand, a great nuisance to motor-cyclists. And, as the day advanced, the road held and reflected a merciless heat from which the tired eyes of our drivers found no relief. A shimmering haze lay over the surrounding desert. At the foot of one steep decline where a sand-drift covered half the road, the convoy caught up with Workshops' cook-truck. This had been forced over a bank by an oncoming vehicle and was now stuck fast, axle-deep in soft sand, and leaning over at an impossible angle. Workshops quickly sprang into action. Hitching two breakdown wagons to the rear, and one on the side, they soon got their cookhouse back on the road, and the convoy pushed on again. It passed **El Arish** (on the boundary) at 6.45 p.m. and crossed into Palestine. Darkness had fallen by the time the Company reached El Aweigla—their first staging-place—after travelling 165 miles. A hot meal revived the weary men, who sat around under scintillating stars in a cool crisp evening, recounting their impressions of the day.

After breakfast, at 7 a.m., an advance party comprising Second-

Lieutenant Washbourn and one Don R left for Gaza. The main convoy lined up an hour later, with the cook trucks up front for easy access on arrival. 'When we set off again in the morning the scene gradually changed and the desert slowly commenced to show patches of grass and other forms of cultivation. Arabs started to appear on the scene—a different type from the Wogs and Bedouins we were used to in Egypt—mainly because they were better clothed and seemed much cleaner. We went on, and, after travelling all day, ended up at Gaza ¹⁰ where the Aussies have their base. By this time the country was all green and even the hills in the background were green and reminded one of home.'

On this leg of the journey a Lancia, towing a trailer, blew a gasket and caused some bother. More trouble was experienced when **Divisional Cavalry** vehicles, travelling behind the Petrol Company convoy, began overtaking the slower and heavier trucks of our Workshops. This came about through Divisional Cavalry putting on their watches one hour at the Egypt-Palestine border. Petrol Company did not advance their time until they reached Quastina at the end of the second day's journey. By then they had covered another 130 miles and passed through the ancient town of **Beersheba**.



From that point the desert ceased altogether. Our trucks bowled along over an excellent road at a steady 25 m.p.h. Convoy discipline,

says the Company's war diary, was excellent. 'We passed through numbers of Jewish towns and settlements', wrote Maurie Browne, 'and it was great to see European people living in decent homes. We got cheery waves from the womenfolk, and the little kids looked great. All the way through there were flowers growing, wild poppies, daisies, dandelions, forget-me-nots, and it was just like driving through the New Zealand country in springtime. We had oranges thrown at us by the dozen. The oranges and grapefruit were lying in heaps rotting under the trees.'

Next day's stage was equally enchanting, with Lydda, Tel Aviv, and the bustling Arab port of **Jaffa** as the highlights. Then came **Haifa**, a fine **Mediterranean** city and seaport, nestling at the foot of Mount Carmel, from whose heights (the Bible says) the prophet Elijah called down fire from Heaven. The same heights at this time were wont to send *up* fire to Heaven, from batteries of ack-ack guns and searchlights guarding the vital pipeline which carries **Iraq** oil to the port. Barrage balloons also guarded the port and its installations against low-level attack from the air.

One Petrol Company diarist noted that in **Haifa** 'The shops are new in the main and of modernistic concrete. The town on the flat is old, but the residential quarter on Mount Carmel has that peculiar mixture of Mexican-cum-Continental design with flat roofs and severe straight walls, cool in summer, centrally heated in winter, and finished in any colour that attracts the mind of the owner.' A few miles farther on, the Company halted at **Acre**, famous for the stand which Sir Sidney Smith made there against Napoleon in the nineteenth century, and no less famous as a Crusader stronghold centuries earlier. Petrol Company's camp was on the rifle range of the Sidney Smith Barracks, a windswept grassy flat, with the sound of the surf beating on a boulder-strewn beach. Mileage for that day was 103.

On 17 March, a glorious spring morning and the fourth day of their trek out of Egypt, Petrol Company followed the ancient Phoenician road along the sea coast through **Tyre** and **Sidon**—the route of a hundred

conquering armies. Roman milestones marked the distances; Roman aqueducts spanned the hilltops. Saracens, Crusaders, the cohorts of Alexander—all in their turn had passed that way. So, too, had the Vichy French; and, as the New Zealanders pushed on through green pastures and olive groves to **Beirut**, they saw in scarred walls and burnt-out vehicles many signs of the recent conflict.

In Beirut, the Lebanese capital, Petrol Company staged at a British leave and transit camp on the outskirts. And although **Beirut** was officially out of bounds, many men took a surreptitious 'shufti' at the city, with its narrow streets, fussy little trams, and its colourful French-Arab populace. Next day we were on the road again, climbing steeply over the **Lebanon** Mountains, with their 10,000-foot peaks and their famous cedar forests. Snow lay at the top of the passes, and a biting wind called forth balaclavas, greatcoats, gloves and leather jerkins. The road was a good one, but with many U and Z turns. Alongside it for the most part ran a meccano-like railway, helped by a ratchet between the lines to give extra holding and pulling power. On the way down this railway dived in and out of tunnels, emerging again in the **Bekaa Valley** to run level with our Company, now rapidly approaching its Syrian home.

This was a large undulating tract of stony land at Sir el Danie, 12 miles past **Baalbek**—excellent for dispersal, but the very devil for digging-in, driving tent-pegs, sinking sumps, latrines, cesspits and so on, all of which were needed to make a permanent camp. Beneath a few meagre inches of soil lay a hard pan of rock, stoutly resistant to pick and crowbar. Tents were erected, with difficulty, but they could be only lightly anchored; so, when the wind increased on the following day (19 March) bringing with it hail and heavy rain, some blew down. Snow soon followed, creating a tiresome slush; so the Company's introduction to **Syria** was not happy. It was also marred, on 19 March, by an unfortunate accident with one of the tip-trucks, when Driver **Bell**¹¹ lost his life. He was buried next day with full military honours, and a large attendance of the local people, at the christian cemetery at **Ras Baalbek**.

Gradually life's difficulties sorted themselves out. Engineers, with compressor drills, attacked the rock-pan; telephones were laid on and visits made to the nearby camps of Divisional Ammunition and Divisional Supply; a canteen was opened and a beer ration arranged; Workshops rigged up hot showers; braziers made from old petrol tins were issued for the tents. The climate, too, soon changed for the better, and by the middle of April the men were once more working in summer kit. By the first week of May, temperatures were up over the hundred mark. This meant the introduction of that sartorial monstrosity, the 'Bombay bloomer'—long shorts or short longs, to be rolled down after sunset as a precaution against mosquito bites.

Mosquito nets, too, were issued, along with dire warnings against failure to use them for their official purpose. (And, for all the ingenuity of the seasoned soldier, no other use *could* be found for them.) Yet, despite these precautions and the vigilance of anti-malaria squads, in April six cases of malaria were admitted to hospital from the New Zealand Division in the course of one day. Typhoid was another danger, lurking in the local vegetables and untreated water. Medical tests showed that all ice-cream on sale in the Divisional area was unhygienic. So, too, were the local folk, who, though friendly, were also lousy; and contact with them was discouraged owing to the risk of typhus.

On 20 March came the first pay-day for Petrol Company in the new country, the men receiving thick wads of Syrian pounds, each worth 2s. 3d. Local prices, however, gave no advantage to this abnormal currency. Much of it was spent on the purchase of curios to send home—vicious-looking curved daggers, filigree silver ornaments, leatherware, garments and so on, mostly hand-made, and of good workmanship. Leave was permitted to the town of Baalbek, and to its nearby ruins—of Roman and pagan temples, built from colossal blocks of stone quarried hundreds of miles away, far up the Nile Valley.

Duties consisted mainly of general carrying, the loads including petrol, mail, supplies, ammunition, personnel, engineers' stores, and

salvage. With shortages of material then very marked in the **Middle East**, and especially in **Syria**, this last assumed considerable importance. Scrap metal, paper, empty tins—all were religiously hoarded by the troops, and inter-unit contests were organised to stimulate the drive. A Divisional Salvage Unit was established at **Rayak**. For March the Company's platoons notched the following mileages: No. 1, 37,651; No. 2, 19,629; Company Headquarters, 6535; Workshops, 27,510, this figure including sixteen vehicles standing in the area with engines running, charging batteries, etc., for a cumulative total of 347½ hours, estimated at 25 m.p.h. The Petrol Detail at Nebi Othmane continued to operate, issuing several thousand gallons of POL daily.

Together with Divisional Ammunition and Divisional Supply, our Company met the general transport requirements of troops in the **Baalbek** area. These demands included the transportation of labourers and materials for the 9 NZ Railway Survey Company at **Rayak**, of stores for the DCRE at Baalbek, of rations and supplies for 15 and 19 DID and 17 BSD, as well as labour, materials and stores for the engineers working in scattered parts of the **Djedeide** fortress. Fourth NZ Reserve MT Company carried out similar duties and also supplied the infantry units with vehicles for exercises and manoeuvres.

So far no mention has been made of the infantry brigades and their attached formations, nor of the role assigned to the Division in **Syria**. That, briefly, was to defend the area against invasion from the north—or at any rate to harass and delay any enemy attempting to come through from that direction. And at this time the situation in the **Balkans** and the advance of the German armies in southern **Russia** made such an attempt a distinct possibility. If planned to coincide with an eastward thrust by Rommel's forces in the **Western Desert**, a drive down through **Turkey** or the Caucasus to the **Suez Canal** would have caught our Middle East Forces in the jaws of a gigantic pincer.

The British plan, therefore, was to prepare for an early offensive against Rommel in the west, while at the same time building up delaying forces in the region from **Syria** to the east. Though the **Lebanon** and

Anti-Lebanon Mountains would not serve as a barrier—they ran the wrong way—their high ground could be prepared as fortified bases from which troops could assail the flanks of an enemy attempting to by-pass the area.

Thus it was decided to prepare a series of fortresses to cover the coastal route, the Bekaa Valley between the two ranges, and the desert approaches farther east. Five such fortresses were planned, and one—the Djedeide—was allotted to our Division. It covered the northern entrance to the Bekaa Valley and was centred on the village of Djedeide, about five miles north of Laboue and 20 miles north of Baalbek. Fourth Brigade, with 28 (Maori) Battalion, 2 Company of 27 (MG) Battalion, and a section of 6 Field Company under command, occupied the eastern section of this fortress upon its arrival in Syria early in March, and set to work preparing its defences. About the same time 6 Brigade arrived at Aleppo and took over from the Australians in that area. Fifth Brigade, which had been sent back to the Western Desert from Kabrit, arrived at Aleppo in the middle of April. It then replaced 6 Brigade, which moved into positions in the Djedeide fortress. Headquarters New Zealand Division set up at Baalbek, with quarters in the Wavell Barracks, the Gouraud Barracks (formerly garrisoned by the French Foreign Legion) and in the Grand New Hotel.

On 26 March 14 Section of Petrol Company's Workshops Platoon was detached to join 6 NZ Field Ambulance at Aleppo, to maintain the vehicles of that unit. No. 13 Section had also been 'farmed out', to HQ Command NZASC at the Gouraud Barracks, so they were dubbed 'base wallopers'. On the afternoon of Saturday, 4 April, this detachment returned in force to visit their 'country cousins' in the Company area, the occasion being one for much jollification. After a meal at the Workshops mess, Sergeant O'Keeffe, ¹² on behalf of the visitors, presented the 'yokels' with a plough of quaint design, made by 13 Section men in their spare time from various bits and pieces. Its mechanical rating was one man-power.

Another diversion was provided in the following week (on Sunday, 12 April) by an 'international' Soccer match, with Divisional Petrol Company playing Bechuanaland. The game took place at **Ras Baalbek** on a ground that had been cleared of all but the largest stones, and which sloped at an angle of 30 degrees. Our team comprised Corporals Stewart, Drummond and Sutherland, Drivers Guy, Stewart, Duke, Taylor, Rudkin, Littleford, Curtis and Stenhouse. Opponents were eight woolly-headed African soldiers and three Tommies. After a hard friendly game, in which the Company's reporter was 'agreeably surprised to find the natives intelligent and very clean players', the score stood at 5-1 in favour of the Africans. Their captain, a CSM who had played as a professional in **Africa**, called for three cheers, and the New Zealanders were given a tremendous ovation from players and spectators alike. Our team was afterwards entertained in the Tommy sergeants' mess, where 'with true farsightedness' a bottle of beer was supplied to each man.

Equally agreeable for those taking part—one officer and ten other ranks—was a three-day leave period spent in **Beirut**. The party stayed at the Hotel D'Orient, near the waterfront, and enjoyed the luxury of clean sheets (which the Army neglects to provide) and frequent baths. Meals were taken where fancy dictated, often at the Australian Club which provided excellent four-course dinners for only one Syrian pound. The Free French Forces Club also welcomed our men, and turned on very good food, all in the French language. Casual sightseeing took the men, as usual, into cafés and shops (which were surprisingly well-stocked) and into the native markets.

In the camp area, Second-Lieutenant Burkitt was in charge of a standing detail, of twenty 30-cwt trucks, engaged in making a detour road, some six miles long, to by-pass **Baalbek** village. For the existing road, being narrow and winding, was prone to traffic jams and hold-ups. This detail left the Company lines at 7.15 a.m. and returned about 6 p.m. every day except Sunday. The work entailed several large fillings, and our drivers co-operated with the Engineers in securing the maximum effort from the civilian labour. Besides driving and tipping,

Petrol Company men often undertook excavation work (since they realised that the job was one of some urgency), thus setting the pace for the Syrian labour gangs, which included women and children. One New Zealand officer wrote of these labourers: 'The natives are splendid workmen—and women. In all their work and play they conduct themselves with a dignity, reserve and courtesy which are in marked contrast to the servility of the Arabs in Egypt.'

Nevertheless, on the night of 5-6 April an EPIP tent was stolen from Petrol Company lines—a reminder that we were still in Arab territory and thus among thieves. The hill tribes- men of **Syria were, in fact, notorious bandits, and strict measures were taken to preserve army property in the Divisional area. Orders were issued to unit pickets to fire on intruders if they failed to halt when challenged. Fourth Brigade formed a mobile security column, consisting of one infantry company, to operate in the **Bekaa Valley** from **Baalbek** to **Homs**. But despite these and other precautions, the pilfering of army stores and the theft of arms and ammunition continued. Armed bandits held up a train at **Ras Baalbek** and stole 25-pounder ammunition. From one village, surrounded and searched by New Zealand provosts and the local gendarmerie, three truckloads of army material was recovered.**

Some of this thieving was thought to be inspired by saboteurs and enemy agents, either for its nuisance value or to provide themselves with arms and equipment. Such agents had been introduced during the Vichy regime, and the area still contained a number of fifth column suspects. There were reports, too, of parachute landings in **Syria, presumably by more fifth columnists; while **Aleppo**, with its population of French, Armenian and Syrian Arabs, was undoubtedly a centre for subversion and intrigue. For these reasons a high degree of caution became necessary when dealing with any of the local population; and New Zealanders soon learned the unwisdom of discussing military matters in public.**

Nevertheless, their stay in **Syria was enjoyable. Petrol Company, always at their happiest in an operating role, had reason to feel they**

were doing a good job. And this was confirmed when, on 3 May, the GOC held a special parade of the NZASC at **Baalbek**. After reviewing the companies, **General Freyberg** remarked on their smart turnout, fine bearing, and 'rugged' appearance. He praised the work they had done for the Division, and urged them never to flag in their efforts to maintain personal and vehicle fitness. He also presented awards won by NZASC personnel in previous campaigns.

That same evening Workshops Platoon held a gala opening of their new canteen, an ambitious affair built from material which, the war diary states, had been gradually 'accumulated' —a variant, no doubt, of the well-known military term 'acquired'. The canteen combined a lock-up shop and messroom, furnished with sandbag settees. It was declared open by the OC, Major Forbes, after which the chairman of the Men's Committee was called upon to christen the canteen counter. He 'proceeded to belabour the counter with a bottle of the doings, and only desisted when the ability of the structure to withstand further punishment became doubtful. The christening was then successfully accomplished in a less vigorous manner'.¹³ Introduced by Second-Lieutenant **Kennerley**,¹⁴ some members of the **Kiwi Concert Party**, officially off-duty, gave excellent items. These, plus contributions from the cream of Petrol Company talent, and a good meal laced with the right sort of liquid, added up to a most enjoyable evening.

For May 1942, Petrol Company mileages were: HQ Platoon, 10,002; No. 1 Platoon, 75,978; No. 2 Platoon, 61,495; Workshops, 20,033, this last figure including mileage assessed for stationary vehicles with engines running for power and other purposes. Total: 167,508 miles. On 19 May the Company's vehicle strength was increased by forty new 30-cwt Bedford tip-trucks, ferried from Tel-el-Kebir by drivers from 2 Platoon. Funniest Routine Order of the month was one forbidding troops to throw stones at low-flying aircraft (our own) engaged in practice attacks.

The beginning of June saw Petrol Company well and truly scrambled.

No. 1 Platoon had been detached, on 20 May, for duty at **Rayak**, and had established a separate camp there. From it they operated three daily details: (a) fourteen 30-cwts to 801 Construction Company, RE. The task of this detachment was very hard on trucks. It involved the lifting of native labour and Bechuana troops from **Zahle** and its vicinity, and the transport of heavy boulders and metal from a quarry in the hills east of **Rayak** to a new road two or three miles away. The road into the quarry was very rough, with soft wet patches caused by the overflowing from native irrigation systems. Each vehicle averaged seven or eight trips daily, mostly in third gear.

Detail (b) comprised twelve 30-cwts to 9 NZ Railway Survey Company. This group carted metal from a pit about a mile east of **Zahle**, for ten or twelve miles along a potholed road to a new railway siding three miles from **Rayak**. The trucks averaged six trips per day, each trip taking an hour and a half. Detail (c) comprised eight 30-cwts to the DCRE at **Rayak**, its main task being the haulage of iron and cement to a dump at the new railway siding.

In addition to the petrol point at Nebi Othmane, another had been established on 22 May at **Forqloss** to service 4 and 6 Brigades on desert manoeuvres. This detail met with much difficulty in procuring petrol, owing to a fire at the **Tripoli** refineries which disrupted the supply system. Nevertheless, during May, Petrol Company issued nearly 200,000 gallons of petrol, plus a proportionate amount of oils and other lubricants.

Workshops Platoon still had its No. 13 Section at **Baalbek**, with HQ NZASC, and its No. 14 Section at **Aleppo**, now with 5 Field Ambulance. A further detachment had gone to 1 Platoon at **Rayak**, and 'sundry fitters' to other maintenance assignments here and there. Captain Latimer and Second-Lieutenant Burkitt were with 1 Platoon, Lieutenant Browne was at the brigade-exercise petrol point in the desert, Second-Lieutenant Kennerley with No. 14 Section at **Aleppo**. The balance of the Company operated on various missions from their main headquarters at Sir el Danie.

After a couple of weeks all this was suddenly 'washed out'. The Germans had begun an offensive in the **Western Desert**, and seemed to be having things much their own way. Our GOC was informed that he might have to move the Division back to the Libyan border. This warning was confirmed, on 14 June, by orders to move.

Along with the rest of the Division, Petrol Company swung swiftly into action. On 15 June, a hot, windless Monday, 2 Platoon packed up, replaced canopies on their trucks in readiness for troop-carrying, refuelled, and made a complete oil change. They uplifted and delivered POL for the Company, snatched an evening meal at 4.30 p.m., then set out to move 4 and 6 NZ Field Regiments and the 14 Light AA Regiment. Their detail totalled fifty trucks, including twelve from 1 Platoon, with Second-Lieutenant **MacShane**¹⁵ in command and Sergeant Jenkin, Corporals J. Plumtree, **Selby**,¹⁶ **Swain**,¹⁷ Stewart, **Hogg**,¹⁸ and Day. By six o'clock next morning all trucks were loaded and on their way—down through **Tiberias** into Palestine. At Nebi Othmane a perspiring petrol detail issued 42,826 gallons in three days, before handing over, on 17 June, to 101 NZ DID. That day Major Forbes left for a Commanders' conference at **Maadi**, covering the 593 sweltering miles by 5.45 next evening.

At Sir el Danie Captain Torbet supervised preparations for the departure of the rest. No. 1 Platoon came in from **Rayak** on 17 June, leaving their tents standing, as instructed. This was part of an elaborate plan to keep the Division's move a secret. Badges and shoulder tabs were removed, vehicle signs painted over. Farewell parties were forbidden. Yet every Arab in the country, it seemed, had wind of what was doing—despite earlier reports in the Turkish press that New Zealand had been captured by the Japs, and we were going back to the **Pacific**.

At Petrol Company's first halt an Arab left his field to come and say: 'Good luck, Kiwis. You go to fight the Germans'. Even before the **Divisional Cavalry** had left their area, local natives wished the regiment farewell and good shooting in **Libya**. At Tiberias a Jewish lad, among the

crowds lining the streets to watch us go through—subdued and anxious crowds, obviously well apprised of Rommel's offensive, and apprehensive of what it might portend for them—threw a note into the truck on which the writer was travelling. It read, simply, 'Beat the Germans'.

On 18 June a Bechuana guard arrived at Petrol Company lines to take over the safeguarding of the camp. Judging by the number of shots heard during the night they took their job very seriously. At 12.45 p.m. three 30-cwts were detailed to uplift **Divisional Provost Company**, and fourteen 30-cwts, under Second-Lieutenant Burkitt, went off to help move 7 Anti-Tank Regiment. Other minor allocations were made, and by six o'clock next morning the remainder of the Company were lined up ready to move. The Division's transfer from **Syria** to the **Western Desert** was expected to take about ten days. Actually, **Divisional Headquarters** reached **Mersa Matruh** in four and a half days. **Divisional Petrol Company** covered the distance— 908 miles—in similar time, pitching camp near Smugglers' Cove at 7.30 p.m. on 23 June.

¹ Op. cit., p. 21.

² **Dvr T. W. Henderson**; born Carterton, 14 Jul 1918; farmhand; wounded 18 Nov 1941; died on active service (drowned off **Tobruk**) 5 Dec 1941.

³ **Sgt R. S. Whitehouse**; Tokoroa; born NZ 16 Aug 1913; salesman.

⁴ **L-Sgt C. E. Hardaker**; born Aust., 18 Nov 1908; died on active service 27 Jun 1942.

⁵ **S-Sgt A. M. Bull**; Tauranga; born **Christchurch**, 14 Jan 1909; clerk.

⁶ **Sgt R. Day**; born NZ 17 Oct 1917; lorry driver.

⁷ **Capt S. W. Burkitt, m.i.d.; Sydney; born Methven, 27 May 1906; accountant.**

⁸ **Maj R. P. Latimer, m.i.d.; Dunedin; born NZ 10 Mar 1915; assistant manager; OC 1 Amn Coy Sep 1944-Feb 1945.**

⁹ **S-Sgt H. M. Quilter; Palmerston North; born Mataura, 2 Mar 1909; bank officer.**

¹⁰ **Quastina, actually, 24 miles past Gaza.**

¹¹ **Dvr E. J. Bell; born Napier, 31 Oct 1919; farm labourer; died on active service 19 Mar 1942.**

¹² **Sgt D. C. O'Keeffe; Lower Hutt; born Manaia, 16 Jul 1908; motor mechanic.**

¹³ **Petrol Company war diary.**

¹⁴ **Capt R. D. Kennerley; born Aust., 14 Mar 1911; service-car driver.**

¹⁵ **2 Lt A. N. MacShane; born NZ 24 Jul 1915; storeman timekeeper; killed in action 5 Nov 1942.**

¹⁶ **Cpl J. C. Selby; Dannevirke; born Dannevirke; 14 Dec 1913; fat-stock buyer.**

¹⁷ **Cpl A. M. Swain, m.i.d.; Rotorua; born Auckland, 2 Feb 1915; accountant.**

¹⁸ **Sgt D. E. Hogg; Hamilton; born Taihape, 24 Jan 1911; student.**

PETROL COMPANY

CHAPTER 11 – BACK TO THE ‘BLUE’

CHAPTER 11

Back to the 'Blue'

AGRIM situation faced the New Zealanders on their return to the **Western Desert**. By 21 June **Tobruk** had fallen, with the loss of over 25,000 men and all their arms and supplies. A badly beaten Eighth Army was retreating in disorder. By 24 June the enemy, 'in great and unexpected force', had reached **Sidi Barrani**, only 80 miles from **Matruh**. Nothing, it seemed, could stop his onward rush to full and final victory in North Africa.

General Freyberg had always been averse to having the New Zealanders 'boxed' in a defensive role. Yet one of our Division's first assignments in the new situation was to garrison the fortress at **Mersa Matruh** and to man the **Charing Cross** outpost some ten miles to the south. By 23 June, when Petrol Company reached **Matruh**, along with other main groups of the NZASC, New Zealand battalions had already taken post in the western defences of the **Matruh** 'box', and others by nightfall were disposed on its eastern side in an arc which stretched from the coast to the airfield on the **Charing Cross** road.

At that time the **Matruh** defence-works were in very bad shape, full of rubbish and in some parts verminous. They had been prepared quite early in the war, some by an Egyptian brigade which had pulled out when **Graziani** threatened Egypt in 1940. **Kippenberger**, whose 5 Brigade Group now took over these posts, observed that most of the dug positions had caved in or filled with sand, much of the wire was on the ground, minefields were badly marked, communications non-existent, and the whole plan of defence obscure. ¹ Since the advancing enemy forces were mostly armoured columns, preparations were made to resist tank attacks. These precautions, besides the usual one of laying minefields, included the issue to our infantry battalions of the new anti-tank spigot mortars, and the replacement of 7 Anti-Tank Regiment's two-pounder guns with new six-pounders. The lighter weapons were issued to newly-formed anti-tank platoons in the infantry.

So, when the Petrol Company detachments began to arrive, carrying troops for the various sectors, they found within the fortress area a scene of some confusion. This was presaged by a torrent of traffic, equally confused, which they had met travelling eastward—away from **Matruh**—while they were pushing up towards the town and the new location of their Company Headquarters at nearby Smugglers' Cove. The site had been selected by Major Forbes, who reached **Daba** at 5 p.m. on 21 June and made **Fuka** an hour later, on 'a glorious night, mild and clearly moonlit, but marred by the sad news of the fall of **Tobruk**'. Next morning Forbes found the road west of **Fuka** 'full of **RAF** and tank transporters moving out, also South African transport and troops'. He reached **Matruh** at 11 a.m., eventually located New Zealand Divisional Headquarters, then set out to 'recce' the Smugglers' Cove area. Here he found 'South African units coming and going and none knew whether they were to stay or not'. This situation soon sorted itself out, and a suitable area for the Company was found.

First Petrol Company platoon to arrive was No. 2, ferrying troops of the New Zealand Divisional Artillery. They had made record time on the long trek from **Syria**, leaving there on 16 June and reaching the Canal by the 18th. No trouble was experienced with the platoon's own vehicles, but at that stage they were towing a wireless pick-up and two limbers for the artillery. Led by Second-Lieutenant MacShane (formerly **General Freyberg's** driver) they passed through **Cairo** via Tel-el-Kebir on 19 June, refuelled ten miles on the Alex side of **Mena**, and staged for the night about a mile past Halfway House.

During the day Corporal Stewart's motor-cycle gave trouble and had to be loaded aboard a truck. Sergeant Jenkin needed to fit a new tyre to his 'bike' and Driver Katene ² had a puncture. The boys were told then that it was 'the **Western Desert** again', and some were not very happy about it. For the delusion still persisted that their destination was 'home'. By 6 a.m. on 20 June MacShane's convoy was on the move again, after starting-trouble with the motor-cycles, some of the trucks, and quite a few of the quads, owing to a heavy night dew. That day the

platoon had its first truck casualty when Driver Henderson's ³ vehicle was hit by a 15-cwt and had its rear 'diff' torn off. It was towed to **Amiriya** by a Divisional Artillery breakdown truck and evacuated to 10 VRD. That night the convoy staged at **El Daba**, where all hands were paid, and many made a beeline to the **NAAFI** for 'beer, glorious beer!'

Next day (21 June) 2 Platoon and the Artillery reached Mersa **Matruh** at noon. They went right through the town and on to the coast, finally stopping about eight miles west of Mersa. Most of the drivers made straight for the sea to cool off. At 6 p.m. they got orders to move again, back to **Matruh**; for by then the Division, which had expected to operate farther west, was scheduled to garrison the fortress. After the usual shovelling around our platoon found a spot to settle and eventually turned in—at 11.30 p.m. In the morning they off-loaded Divisional Artillery at a point two miles away, then moved to an area of their own, ready once again to operate under orders from Company Headquarters.

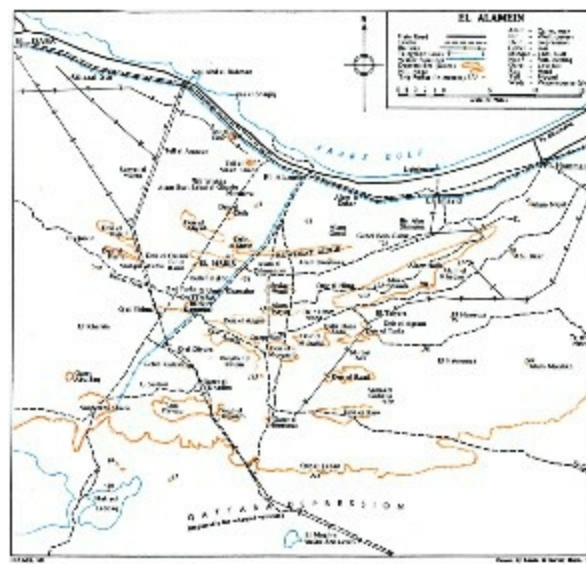
These orders were delivered personally on the 23rd by the OC, who informed 2 Platoon that they would be joining the rest of the Company that afternoon at Smugglers' Cove. After that the platoon was to take its 30-cwt tip-trucks back to **Amiriya**, where they would be replaced by three-tonners. Loading for the eastbound convoy was detailed as follows:

16 × 30 cwts to 10/11 South African Field Ambulance.

4 × 30 cwts to 6 NZ Brigade Band.

4 × 30 cwts to 4 NZ Brigade Band.

While awaiting transport (destination **Maadi**) 4 Brigade Band occupied itself by playing and marching through the streets of **Mersa Matruh**. 'This apparent disregard of the prevailing spirit of alarm', says the band's war diary, 'caused considerable comment, the music of the band surprising many



EL ALAMEIN

of the British and South African troops who seemed to expect the enemy to come over the escarpment at any moment.'

Meanwhile, No. 1 Platoon, under Second-Lieutenant Sam Burkitt, had uplifted troops of 7 Anti-Tank Regiment at their headquarters in Syria on 19 June, and four days later this convoy also was moving up towards Matruh. Burkitt states that he found progress difficult on that sector because of the large volume of traffic then moving both ways. His convoy reached Matruh at 6 p.m. on 23 June, only to meet with further difficulty there in quitting his load of gunners so that he could return as ordered to Company Headquarters. For Petrol Company officers knew that every available vehicle would soon be needed for supplying POL to the Division.

'A/Tk moved to an incorrect location', Burkitt states, 'and then on to a still further incorrect location. Pending verification of correct area my vehicles remained loaded despite the urgent necessity of our returning to our own unit. This was straightened out towards midnight and we returned to our Company area at Smugglers' Cove.'

Thus by 24 June the bulk of Petrol Company, with the exception of Workshops which had remained at El Daba, was together again at Smugglers' Cove. After reveille at 4.30 and breakfast at 5.30 on a fine cool morning, the operating vehicles proceeded to their various allotted

tasks. No. 1 Platoon, like No. 2, was to return its 30-cwt tip-trucks to **Amiriya** and exchange them for three-tonners. Loading for 1 Platoon's eastward journey included British troops from the **Matruh** leave and transit camp to establish a new L and T Camp at **Fuka**; nurses and their equipment for Alex; and wounded men evacuated from 58 General Hospital.

Company Headquarters, with vehicles and personnel not on detail, lined up in convoy at 6 a.m. ready to move back to **Daba**. The road was still thick with transport being cleared out from **Matruh**, and the convoy was soon split up. The first vehicles reached **Daba** at 9.55 a.m. By noon all had settled down in the new area five miles farther east, and about one mile from the coast, where Workshops were already in occupation. Three of the Company's tip-trucks, carrying the **Divisional Provost Company** from **Syria**, had not yet reported in; so three 3-ton HQ lorries were unloaded and despatched to intercept the missing vehicles, which were to be off-loaded and directed back to **Amiriya**.

On Thursday, 25 June, the men still in camp at **Daba** were glad of the opportunity to sleep in—until 7 a.m.—after their strenuous time since leaving **Syria**. During the day parties were sent to the beach for a swim, with armed lookouts posted and a special watch for enemy aircraft; and this refreshing dip was also most welcome. But the day was no easy one for Petrol Company's OC. At 12.45 p.m. Major Forbes received orders to report to Headquarters Command NZASC, urgently. He left for **Matruh** almost right away. There, at a conference with Colonel Crump and other officers, he was 'told pretty shortly that the Division was moving out to the Desert, to waylay the German Army—or at any rate, to delay it. My transport, for a complete re-equipment of the Company, plus replacements for ambulances, water carts and ASC vehicles for other units, was already starting to roll in. Some were driven by Base personnel, and all were loaded with ammunition. I expected about 180 new vehicles, all told.

'Crump handed over a long screed and said: "There's the distribution

list. I'm off". Then away he went with the Division, and that was the last I saw of him for about a week. In the meantime Supply Coy had arrived. Both Pryde and I were left with a wireless set—which we didn't know too much about. The idea was that the Colonel would call us up from wherever he was and let us know what to do whenever the companies were in a position to do it.

'Nothing *could* be done by Pet Coy until the new vehicles arrived. But it was obvious we'd need men to drive the trucks, and petrol to refuel them. Also, large quantities of POL would certainly be required by the Division for whatever it was doing out there in the blue. The position in **Matruh** was deteriorating fast—but by rummaging around we managed to get some petrol from a dump, which was then being prepared for demolition. The next thing was the men. But they were back at **Daba**, nearly 90 miles away. So, late though it was, I shot back and routed out the Company—at about 2 a.m. We pulled out all available drivers and piled them onto some 10-ton Lancias which we'd picked up in our travels, then hooled back up to Smugglers Cove, where we arrived about daybreak.

'I then found to my horror that Pryde had got a message to move Div Supply out into the Desert. ⁴ He had his Company almost complete, with his trucks drawing supplies from 14 BSD in **Matruh**. My vehicles were still just trickling in from base, and most of them were chocked up with ammunition. But it was obvious to me that the essential thing for the Division now was both the ammunition and the petrol; and about then I got a message to say that Div required Pet Coy to send it 40 3-tonners fully loaded with POL—about 25,600 gallons—by next day!'

Back at Company Headquarters, problems of a different kind were being tackled by Captain Torbet. As Officer-in-Charge Divisional Petrol Company Workshops, he was responsible for the distribution of all the new ASC vehicles—now arriving in dribs and drabs, and mostly cluttered up with ammo. His issue schedules, complete with WD numbers running to the usual six or eight figures, are summarised as follows:

| Unit | Three tonners | Water lorries | 15-cwt AA vehicles | Bantams Ambulances | |
|-----------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------|----------|
| Pet Coy | 61 | – | 2 | | |
| Amn Coy | 54 | 2 | 2 | | |
| Sup Coy | 5 | 2 | 2 | | |
| 4 Fd Amb | 14 | 2 | – | | |
| 5 Fd Amb | 4 | 2 | – | | I |
| 6 Fd Amb | 13 | 2 | – | | |
| HQ | | | | 2 | |
| NZASC | | | | | |
| HQ Pro Coy | | | | 6 | |
| | – | – | – | – | – |
| | 151 | 10 | 6 | 8 | I |

With Second-Lieutenant Kennerley and Corporal Clifford,⁵ Torbet had been sent back to the Canal Zone to see to the handing over of the 30-cwt tip-trucks at 10 VRD. This had to be completed by the night of Wednesday, 24 June, since the vehicles were needed on the following day for an urgent and special job by Headquarters Middle East Force. That meant much shuffling of loads and drivers at Alexandria and Amiriya under supervision of the Company's NCOs, while platoon officers went back with the emptied vehicles to 10 VRD. Torbet's team returned to Company Headquarters, Daba, at 9 a.m. on 26 June, and were immediately confronted with a distribution tangle of no small magnitude.

At that stage Divisional Supply Company, besides carrying rations, was also carting water for the now mobile Division, assisted by a platoon of 6 RMT Company. But some vehicles from that platoon were on loan to 4 NZ Field Ambulance; thus it was imperative that fourteen three-tonners be issued immediately to 4 Field Ambulance so that the RMT platoon could get on with the now highly important job of carting water. To expedite matters, the voucher system, with its WD numbers and other complicating details was scrapped and the vehicles issued on an *ad hoc* basis. Petrol Company, also, stood in urgent need of new vehicles, since it was required to send the Division forty loaded trucks on the following day. In the meantime, a small Petrol Company

detachment under Captain Latimer was put under command of Divisional Supply Company to meet the Division's immediate requirements of POL.

There was also the problem of quitting the ammunition, which threatened to gum up the work of vehicle distribution. Divisional Ammunition Company took delivery of all they needed to complete their second-line requirements, and the remainder was sent on to Divisional Artillery's Rear HQ at **Matruh**. Besides that, Torbet had to contend with a clutter of water carts, motor-cycles, ambulances, PUs, and so forth, now piling up on Petrol Company's doorstep. In the midst of all this was the OC's concern to get his forty Petrol Company trucks (he actually managed to get 42) cleared, manned and loaded with POL for the Division.

'To do that', Forbes recalls, 'it was a case of all hands and the cook working like niggers. Sam Burkitt was to take this convoy, comprising No. 1 Platoon plus two sections of No. 2, to build up Rod Latimer's detachments. By 1500 hrs on June 26 the convoy was ready, and had set up its HQ east of Div Amn Coy on the Smugglers' Cove Road. The drivers had orders to change oil, refuel, and stand by to load POL. But where to get that POL was the question! No instructions were available from HQ Comd NZASC, which was away with HQ NZ Div; so I called on S and T, **10 Corps**—only to be told that the New Zealand Division was now under **13 Corps**, whose location was not known!

'By now I was being very considerably badgered by the British Command in **Matruh**, who insisted that I get out. Demolitions had already commenced, and shells were falling in the town. I was told that a lot of the ammunition which had been brought up was to be dumped on the beach and destroyed. At last I found a sizeable dump of petrol, in charge of a Tommy officer, complete with pistol, who was about to blow it up. Some hot words passed between us—but in the end I got the petrol. Burkitt's trucks were filled, and all the other vehicles, as fast as they could be cleared of ammunition. I then returned to Amn Coy where I found vehicle issues proceeding well.

‘Things were now getting so hot in [Matruh](#), with the rapid approach of the enemy, that I decided to move all that was left of Pet Coy, plus the unissued vehicles, back to Company HQ at [Daba](#). Some stray men were found as drivers for a number of the trucks, and these were despatched, with the balance to follow later. The motor-cycles, being without riders, were shoved into ambulances. I got out with the “tail-enders” towards dusk, and hot-footed it down the road to [Daba](#). There were alarms and excursions on the way: the road, as far as [Fuka](#), was bombed and strafed, and we were shelled quite heavily from the escarpment. All trucks came in loaded with petrol, plus, I believe, a quantity of “unofficial stores”—canned beer, cigarettes, tobacco—from the [Mersa Matruh NAAFI](#), which was then being demolished, along with supplies of every description. We reached [Daba](#) at 2315 hrs, and I immediately sent Bill Washbourn back to [Matruh](#) with 20 men to uplift the balance of the trucks and return them to the Company area.’

Washbourn's party had a hectic time, and were lucky, in fact, to return at all. Their loads included a truckful of camel tanks—large water containers—which proved invaluable during subsequent treks around the arid desert.

In the prevailing scheme of wholesale demolitions the El Daba NAAFI also ‘went up’, though not before it had been well done over by enterprising members of Petrol Company. And when, at the height of things, Lieutenant Burkitt innocently entered, all unaware of what was going on, one driver sold him a bottle of whisky, in a brisk, across-the-counter transaction quite satisfactory to all concerned. ⁶

While all this was happening the ‘front-line’ war had been moving fast and far. But of such swift movements and their momentous consequences, Petrol Company, from its OC downward, knew nothing.

Before the Division went to [Syria](#) our GOC was convinced that Eighth Army would ‘get into a mess in the Western Desert’ because of its policy of splitting up divisions into brigade groups. Corps battles, the

GOC held, not brigade-group battles, should be fought against the Germans. And now that the struggle for Egypt had begun, **Freyberg** considered that one really hearty blow was all that was needed to put the enemy off his balance and Eighth Army on top again. 'But', writes J. L. Scoullar in the New Zealand official war history of this campaign, 'the idea was not put to the test. Last-minute changes in the British plans reduced, if they did not eliminate, the chances of giving a knockout blow. Indecisive, spiritless command on the day of battle made its delivery impossible.' ⁷

The enemy had crossed the Egyptian frontier on 24 June. Eighth Army, falling back towards **Mersa Matruh**, hoped to make a stand there, on a line extending south to **Sidi Hamza**, with the New Zealanders, as we have seen, occupying the **Matruh** fortress area. But no sooner had our 4 and 5 Brigade Groups taken up their positions than the plan was changed. To the great relief of our GOC, who disagreed with this use of a highly trained and mobile Division, then the equal in numbers and fire power of any two other infantry divisions in the **Western Desert**, orders came on the 24th to prepare to move again, out into the desert.

Under this new directive, 4 and 5 NZ Brigade Groups were replaced in **Matruh** by **10 Indian Division**, which, with 50 Division and other elements now formed **10 Corps**. Our troops passed to the command of **13 Corps**, under General Gott. Their task was to protect the southern flank of the **Matruh-Hamza** line, operating in a mobile role from positions on the escarpment at **Minqar Qaim**. The two brigade groups accordingly moved south on 25 and 26 June. Sixth Brigade Group had been ordered back to **Amiriya** to act as a reserve; one company from each of the seven battalions in the other two brigades was also LOB.

This move south put a heavy strain on NZASC. Even with the number of troops thus reduced, it was hard to find enough transport to get the Division mobile. Both the 4 and 6 Reserve MT Companies had been engaged taking LOB personnel and unwanted equipment to the rear. On their return they were immediately pressed into service again, along with all trucks that could be spared from the 'surplus' units. Even

then, fifty vehicles had to be borrowed from **10 Indian Division** and others were supplied by Eighth Army. Divisional Supply Company collected and filled 10,000 water containers and worked flat out to build up a three-day food reserve to be carried by the Division, while at the same time making the normal daily issues. From the commencement of the move the daily water ration was to be three-quarters of a gallon per man for all purposes, including cooking, vehicle radiators and anti-tank guns—unless potable wells or cisterns could be found. The brigades also carried enough POL for 200 miles, and first-line supplies of ammunition.

On the first night of the move, 25-26 June, General Auchinleck himself assumed direct command of Eighth Army. He decided that **Matruh**, from its situation and the forces available, could not be held as a fortress; so he issued orders for a mobile battle to be fought on the **Matruh-Hamza** line, with orders for Eighth Army to fall back on the **Alamein** line if necessary to avoid being overwhelmed by the enemy. Under this plan the large dumps of POL and other military stores in **Matruh** would have to be carried back or demolished, hence the confusion our ASC elements encountered there.

On 26 June the enemy struck at the centre of the **Matruh-Hamza** line, between **10 Corps** to the north and **13 Corps**, including the New Zealanders, to the south. Next day our positions at **Minqar Qaim** were bypassed by large forces, which could be clearly observed moving eastward out of range to our north. The enemy then developed an encircling movement and attacked from the north, the east, and the south. These attacks were held—much to the enemy's surprise, since he was still unaware of the identity of the **Minqar Qaim** defenders and expected this force, like the rearguards he had recently encountered, to quickly fold up.

Nevertheless, with our positions surrounded, our supply- lines cut, and the artillery running short of ammunition, there was only one alternative to complete annihilation. A break-out must be attempted. General Gott, commanding **13 Corps**, had already told **Freyberg** 'to

sidestep if necessary and not to regard the ground which he was at present holding as vital'.⁸ So, in a daring night operation which featured a surprise bayonet attack by 19, 20 and 28 (Maori) Battalions, the Division broke clear. In this action—brilliantly successful despite a number of misadventures—our troops caught the redoubtable *Africa Corps* napping and inflicted severe casualties. Our own losses, too, were quite considerable; but the Division escaped intact as a fighting force, and more than ready to battle on. By the afternoon of 28 June it had reassembled in the *Kaponga Box*, a fortress in the *Alamein* line, where it calmly waited for Rommel to catch up.

Divisional Petrol Company took no active part in the dramatic *Minqar Qaim* episode, though some from Divisional Supply Company, Divisional Ammunition, and other ASC units were involved, a number of them becoming casualties, others winning decorations for gallantry. Elements of our own Company to come nearest to the fighting were Latimer's and Burkitt's detachments which had been left behind in Mersa *Matruh* with the Divisional Supply Company under Major Pryde's command when Forbes and the others went back to *El Daba*. By seven o'clock that night (26 June) *Matruh* was practically deserted. All English troops had left the town and 'there was an uneasy atmosphere everywhere, to which a nearby Bofors crew contributed with the information that they were in an anti-tank role, protecting the road running past the camp'.⁹

Back in his Company HQ at Smugglers' Cove, Major Pryde of Divisional Supply Company was in a quandary. He had instructions to await orders from Command NZASC concerning the disposal of his *Matruh* detachments; but his *Divisional Signals* operators were unable to raise either Main or Rear Division. Should he withdraw, without orders, and thus risk the stigma of desertion of duty? Or should he remain and be captured? At 2.30 a.m. on 27 June he pulled his No. 5 Platoon out of the town and at 4 a.m. called a conference of officers. One reported seeing flares near *Garawla*, south-east of *Matruh*; and throughout the night heavy gunfire was heard, which appeared to be drawing constantly

nearer. Shells were lobbing into the fortress itself.

At 10 a.m. news was received that Petrol Company detachment's AA truck had been involved in a collision with an Indian vehicle, resulting in the death of Lance-Sergeant C. E. Hardaker, and injuries to Drivers H. A. **Billing**,¹⁰ S. **Fraser**,¹¹ and B. U. Stanger. Sergeant Hardaker was buried in the British military cemetery near **Matruh**, attended by a small party from Divisional Supply Company, and with Padre **Holland**¹² officiating.

During the morning Pryde sent Corporal **Burgess**¹³ south to the **Minqar Qaim** area, looking for Colonel Crump. Contact was made about midday, and the Colonel instructed that Pryde be ready to move immediately, but that he was to await a signal. In the meantime word reached **Matruh** that the road to the east had been cut, at **Qasaba**. Captain Latimer was sent to check on this report. He found the road still open, but with the enemy only seven miles from it. A Hussars regiment appeared to be offering the only opposition. Pryde immediately decided to move. Soon afterwards a radio- telephone message was received instructing him to do so, and to carry replenishments for the Division to a rendezvous with Major Bracegirdle, the senior supply officer, at **Sidi Haneish**.

Like Forbes, Pryde had had the foresight to uplift everything he could from the **Matruh** dumps before they were demolished. So, when his convoy moved off, under perfect discipline, at 2 p.m., it carried two days' rations for the Division besides 30,000 gallons of petrol and a good supply of ammunition and water. Most of these were left on wheels with Bracegirdle at **Sidi Haneish**, while the rest of the Supply Company and its attachments, including some Petrol Company vehicles under Captain Latimer, moved to a point 20 miles south of **Fuka**, arriving at 10.30 p.m.

At 6.30 p.m. that same day the trucks carrying water, ammunition, and rations set out under Captain **Morris**¹⁴ of Divisional Supply Company to find Rear Division, which had taken up a position 17 miles due east from **Minqar Qaim**. The Petrol Company trucks, now numbering

26, under command of Second-Lieutenant Burkitt, had already departed for the same destination some two hours earlier. Burkitt recalls: 'Major Bracegirdle directed me on a bearing of 215 degrees for a distance of some 12 miles. After traversing about 16 miles I found Rear Div. Then, with the Supply, Water and Amn detachments, which had joined us, we moved at 2130 hrs on a bearing five miles south and four miles west to establish a replenishment area—with personnel standing by for an immediate move if that should become necessary. There was much bombing in the neighbourhood, and much activity on our western flank that evening. Towards dawn an artillery officer reported that our zone was not a particularly healthy one.'

This, of course, is a classic understatement. The 'activity' on Burkitt's western flank that night was nothing less than the breakout from **Minqar Qaim**. And Burkitt's zone now lay square in the path of the Division's retreat, and the hot pursuit which Jerry was sure to lay on that morning. What the artillery officer actually reported was that the Division had been ambushed and cut up, and was now scattered all over the desert!

Stragglers, presumably from the scattered 5 Brigade column, began to drift through at 5 a.m. with alarming stories of being the sole survivors of the New Zealand Division. It was impossible to obtain accurate information from them, and Morris went off in search of Rear Division for further orders. All he could find at its location of the previous night were a few tanks of 1 Armoured Division. ¹⁵

While Morris was away, Rear Division sent a signal ordering the whole convoy to move to a point 20 miles due east. The Petrol Company detachment took off at 8 a.m., laagered at the appointed place, and had breakfast. Burkitt then went to contact Rear Division, which was in the same area. But he found all transport in the locality moving out rapidly. 'I noted a number of tanks coming over an escarpment some four miles north-west', he says, 'but could not be certain whether they were ours. On returning to my vehicles I found that they had already begun to move with everyone else. I eventually located them with the exception

of one or two which became mixed up with the Amn Coy, and at approximately 1600 hrs we arrived at a location south of **Fuka** where I contacted Rear Div HQ. Later in the evening we moved again, with Div Amn Coy, to a more dispersed area.'

Next morning (29 June) at 8.30 the detachment moved another ten miles north and established a petrol point, doing very brisk business with our battalions and the artillery. Burkitt's load of 17,000 gallons was exhausted by 2 p.m. and demands were still being made. He was unable to obtain any information as to where to secure fresh supplies, nor did he know the whereabouts of Company HQ. 'So', states Burkitt, 'I despatched a message to Capt Latimer for the POL held by him—at which juncture an L of C officer arrived and asked if I could direct him to where he had to take his load of 68,000 gallons of petrol!'

Burkitt drew about 15,000 gallons from this consignment to meet urgent requirements. Later Captain Latimer arrived, bringing enough POL for all Divisional needs. Next day the empty Petrol Company vehicles pulled out, and Latimer led them back to the area occupied by Company HQ.

This group, with Workshops, had spent 27 June at **El Daba**— a hot day, made more unbearable by hordes of flies. Whoever occupied the area previously had not been too fussy about its cleanliness. All ranks had a bathe in the **Mediterranean**, and apart from some aerial activity the day was quiet. News of Claude Hardaker's death came through, causing general regret, for he was a popular and efficient NCO.

Captain Washbourn's party had made a safe return from their midnight dash to **Matruh**, bringing back the new vehicles intact, despite much activity by enemy aircraft which bombed over a wide area and machine-gunned the road. Workshops spent most of the next day checking over the vehicles, which were then issued to drivers. On 28 June Petrol Company's war diary notes:

Flies damnable. Major Forbes and CSM Cooper proceeded to contact

Div HQ, and left word to pack as far as possible to allow for moving at short notice. Returned at midday and gave orders to move at 1515 hrs. 2/Lt Kennerley proceeded ahead to **Amiriya** with 10 × 3 ton and 1 Water lorry for 6 NZ Fd Amb.

Left Daba for **Alamein** 1515 hrs after stay at **Daba** marred only by lack of news, flies and enemy aerial activity. The road was packed with transport moving back. No incidents en route, and arrived at new area, 16 miles south of **Alamein** turn-off at 2005 hrs. Made camp for night. Some enemy air activity, mostly during early part of night, when bombs were dropped adjacent to camp and an ammunition lorry set on fire, the blaze bringing other planes which discharged their loads, much to our discomfort. Information reached us later that during this raid the Sup Coy canteen truck had been hit with resultant casualties.

That night a group of Petrol Company other ranks from Captain Latimer's detachment had a narrow escape. They, too, had congregated round Supply Company's canteen truck, listening to a **BBC** news broadcast. They were just walking back to their own lines when the raid commenced. The detachment's vehicles were immediately ordered out into the desert for wider dispersal, but this move was hampered by the presence of a minefield. While moving his own truck, Lance-Corporal Baldwin heard a voice from the darkness, blasphemously proclaiming the owner's inability to get his so-and-so vehicle started.

Baldwin ordered his '2 i/c' (Driver **Sisson** ¹⁶) to take his own vehicle away while he, Baldwin, sprinted over to help the driver-in-distress. But their combined efforts, between bomb-blasts, failed to get the motor ticking. Just then **Dick Curtis**, ¹⁷ also making a late run for safety, came zooming by, was stopped, and asked to take the jibbing truck on tow.

'This was done', says Baldwin, 'and we carried on for a mile or so, until Sgt "Darkie" **Aitken** ¹⁸ suddenly hopped out of the darkness in front, and told us we were heading straight for the minefield. He advised us to bed down beside him for the night, and boosted our morale with a

cupful of rum. Next day we discovered that the recalcitrant truck had been “fuelled” with a jerrican of water—a not uncommon error in those days, when petrol and water came in similar containers.’

Lionel Stubbs also had a remarkable experience. As a Mechanist Corporal he had in his bivvy the carburettor from Driver Bloomfield's truck. When the dispersal order came he made a beeline for Bloomfield's vehicle to replace the missing part. But Bloomfield, he found, had already driven the truck away—minus its carburettor! The only explanation which could be found was that when the starter-motor operated, it shot some petrol from the open petrol pipe directly into the open engine manifold.

The war diary continues:

June 29: 0700 hrs Reville. Heavy ground mist. Four planes parked at side of our area took off at 0830 hrs. Major Forbes proceeded to HQ Comd NZASC, who had moved in nearby previous evening. On return instructed that Coy would move to new area at 1300 hrs, a distance of about 5 miles. Move carried out according to schedule, and made new camp in Wadi close to Fortress A. Excellent camp site, with ample room for dispersion, good surface, and good digging (the latter a consideration much appreciated, for even the bravest does not abhor his ‘funk-hole’ now).

June 30: Warm, clear morning. Lt Browne returned from PT course at [Sarafand](#). Part of No 1 Pl, under 2/Lt Burkitt, returned to Coy from detachment. No 2 Pl left for Hammam to load POL. Order received 1445 hrs to move at 1530 hrs, following Sup Coy. Moved out on schedule, in a SE direction. Waited on edge of Amn Coy area for Sup Coy to move, but it was 1610 hrs before their final trucks left area. By this time several convoys were on the track and our move was delayed to allow these to get clear, as our joining in would only impede the progress on the already congested track. A dust storm also arose which made matters even worse. Moved at 1650, part up a wadi. Going very soft, and several vehicles already stuck on steep slope out of wadi. Once up the slope, the

going became better, and in places rocky, though at one point soft going was again met, and several 2-wheel drive vehicles became stuck. After covering about 18 miles Sup Coy who were leading, stopped, and on inquiries being made it was found they were off their correct course. Following a short conference, it was decided to camp for night, as it was dusk, and move to correct position on 1 July. Capt Torbet and Cpl Aitken proceeded to **Amiriya**. Evacuated 30 cwt Fordson and 3 ton Bedford 2 × 4.

Next day the correct locations were found and occupied. This last move had been made to conform with a transfer of 4 and 5 Brigades from the **Kaponga** (or **Qattara**) Box to Deir el Munassib, a depression about nine miles to the south-east, from which area mobile columns could operate in defence of the fortress approaches. The headquarters of the three ASC companies, Ammunition, Supply and Petrol, together with Rear Division, set up a bivouac area some 12 miles farther east. Sixth Brigade remained in the **Kaponga Box**, which it had occupied throughout the previous few days.

Such was the situation when June ended, with the enemy, flushed with victory, pressing hotly on toward the alluring goals of **Cairo**, **Alexandria** and the fertile Nile Valley.

¹ *Infantry Brigadier*, p. 126.

² Dvr W. C. Katene; **Wanganui**; born **Whakatane**, 18 Dec 1917; labourer.

³ **S-Sgt D. C. Henderson**; born **Greymouth**, 15 Sep 1917; clerk; died of wounds 14 Jul 1942.

⁴ Only part of Supply Company moved out.

⁵ **Lt T. D. Clifford**; **Christchurch**; born **Palmerston North**, 6 Mar 1916; rates clerk.

⁶ **Bill Washbourn** recalls that some months later he noticed two German prisoners on one of his trucks, wearing British KD shorts and shirts. When he asked them where they had got this rig-out, they replied, 'From the same place, probably, that you got yours—the Officers' Shop at **El Daba**'.

⁷ *Battle for Egypt*, p. 68.

⁸ *Battle for Egypt*, p. 92.

⁹ **P. W. Bates**, *Supply Company*, p. 208.

¹⁰ **Dvr H. A. Billing; Auckland**; born NZ 23 Jun 1918; horse breaker.

¹¹ **Dvr S. Fraser; Whangarei**; born Whangarei, 14 Aug 1915; labourer.

¹² **Rt. Rev. J. T. Holland; Hamilton**; born Newcastle-on-Tyne, 31 Jan 1912; Anglican minister; Bishop of Waikato.

¹³ **Cpl S. C. Burgess**; born NZ 6 un 1916; carpenter.

¹⁴ **Maj J. R. Morris, m.i.d.**; Dunedin; born England, 8 Dec 1911; salesman.

¹⁵ **Bates**, *op. cit.*, pp. 215–16.

¹⁶ **Dvr E. R. Sisson; Taihape**; born Blenheim, 14 Oct 1918; brewery employee.

¹⁷ **Cpl R. Curtis**; Hastings; born India, 19 May 1913; bloodstock breeder.

¹⁸ **WO II H. D. Aitken, MM, m.i.d.; Tauranga; born Hawera, 13
Nov 1895; motor mechanic; won MM in Mtd Fd Amb in 1914-18
war.**

PETROL COMPANY

CHAPTER 12 – A FATEFUL MONTH

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A Fateful Month

JULY 1942 was a most critical month for the Allied fortunes in North Africa. The fate of Egypt-perhaps of the whole **Middle East**-hung upon a thread. On the run since **Tobruk** fell, Eighth Army, its commander decreed, would stand and fight on the **Alamein** line. But could Auchinleck rally his shattered forces, pursued as they were by a determined foe, whose impetus showed no sign of abating? The enemy's objective was the **Suez Canal**. Only the **Alamein** line, and a battered Eighth Army, now lay between.

From a defence viewpoint the **Alamein** line had many advantages. It was short-less than 40 miles over-all. It ran roughly north and south, across the enemy's line of advance. At one end was the coast; at the other the **Qattara Depression**, a sea of soft sand and salt marshes virtually impassable for army transport. With its flanks thus protected, the line was braced by three bastions-the **El Alamein Box** near the coast; Fortress A (also known as the **Kaponga Box**, or the **Qattara Box**), a well-prepared stronghold about 20 miles to the south- south-west; and Fortress B, some 15 miles farther south-south- west, close to the edge of the **Qattara Depression**.

Auchinleck's first big difficulty was to find enough war-worthy troops to man these strongpoints and protect the gaps between them. Fortunately, i South African Division under General Pienaar had been brought back intact from the **Sollum** area before the end of June, and was now entrenched in the **Alamein Box**. The only other large infantry formation on the spot and fit to fight was the New ealand Division, allocated to Fortress A. Fifth Indian Division, by now only at about one brigade strength and split into a number of small mobile columns, was initially assigned to Fortress B.

The gap to the north of the New Zealand Division was to be 'plugged' by what remained of I Armoured Division, with **50 Division** (remnants) in

support. Eighteenth Indian Infantry Brigade, lately arrived from **Iraq**, was also assigned to positions in this gap. South of our Division, mobile columns of 7 Armoured Division were to cover the gap between the **Kaponga Box** and Fortress B. But as enemy thrusts and pressures developed, and Eighth Army worked out its own counter-measures, these dispositions were, of course, varied.

Fortress B soon proved untenable and the Indians were withdrawn, leaving the New Zealanders guarding the southern flank. While our 6 Brigade, which had been moved forward from **Amiriya** while the Division was at **Minqar Qaim**, held out in Fortress A, 4 and 5 Brigades and the Artillery formed mobile columns which struck at enemy penetrations north of the Fortress. By 9 July, however, the **Kaponga Box** was evacuated and 4 and 5 Brigade Groups occupied positions east of the Fortress area, their main line running from north-east to south-west, with the artillery deployed facing north and north-west. This further shortened the **Alamein** line which now ran, apart from bulges, due north and south. Sixth Brigade again went into reserve at **Amiriya**. And with this brief sketch of the general situation we must now return to Petrol Company.

Their first task was to refuel the Division's transport following the move from **Minqar Qaim**. They were also ordered to supply its mobile elements—4 and 5 Brigades and Artillery—with enough POL to carry them 200 miles. As already mentioned, a replenishment area for ammunition, supplies and petrol had been established nine miles west of Company Headquarters, i.e., a few miles east from Divisional Headquarters at Munassib. At 10 a.m. on 1 July, lorries from Nos. 1 and 2 Platoons, under Second-Lieutenant MacShane and carrying 10,000 gallons, were despatched to this replenishment area, where their loads were soon quitted. Then arose the usual conundrum: where was the Company to obtain more petrol?

Preliminary instructions had indicated that the refilling of Petrol Company's load-carriers would be done at Hammam, east of **El Alamein**, or possibly from 96 FMC, both of which lay to the rear of Petrol

Company's headquarters. So instructions were given to Lieutenant Browne (recently promoted, and detailed to act as Petrol Officer for the New Zealand Division) that the lorries of MacShane's convoy were to be sent back, when empty, to the Company area. Meanwhile, Commander NZASC had sent Captain Tomlinson¹ of his staff to check on refilling arrangements with Corps and 96 FMC. This officer duly contacted Corps, who instructed that refilling was to be done in Fortress A-then occupied by 6 Brigade-'to clear an FMC allegedly still there', as Petrol Company's war diary quaintly puts it. In view of this new instruction Tomlinson countermanded the Company order for MacShane's empty trucks to return to Company Headquarters, since they would now need to go forward, not back, to be refilled.

Major Forbes was not very happy over this. The latest situation reports, which he had just seen at Headquarters Command NZASC, showed enemy tanks east of the general Alamein line-and our soft-skinned vehicles would be 'easy meat' in any encounter. Neither Colonel Crump nor the Senior Supply Officer was then available; but Forbes managed soon afterwards to contact the Colonel, who confirmed that refilling would take place in the Fortress. MacShane was thereupon sent forward, with thirty-four 3-ton trucks from 1 and 2 Platoons. That same afternoon (i July) four missing lorries of 1 Platoon which had lost their way the previous evening were picked up and returned to the Company area.

After MacShane had started on his 12-mile journey Forbes returned to NZASC Headquarters, only to learn that the position east of the Alamein line had still further deteriorated. All forward convoys were now to be stopped. He phoned 6 Brigade Supply Officer at the Fortress and found that MacShane's convoy had arrived safely and was loading. Meanwhile, convoys from Divisional Supply and Divisional Ammunition Companies, also bound for the Fortress, had been turned back.

MacShane left the Kaponga Box, fully loaded, at 8 p.m., receiving much attention on the northern exit from enemy aircraft, which

dropped flares but no bombs. His convoy proceeded about ten miles east then halted to await the moonrise, still attended by enemy flares. At midnight they pushed on again, their progress hampered by soft sand and poor visibility. To add to their troubles, intermittent rain commenced. In the murk they passed about one mile wide of the Company area, and MacShane lost touch with ten of his trucks. He then ordered the rest of the convoy to laager for the night while he set out to find Company Headquarters. This he eventually did at 3 a.m. By 7 a.m. the convoy had been guided in, minus the ten missing vehicles, which turned up later in the day. All told, they brought back 20,000 gallons.

Meanwhile Captain Washbourn, with seventeen vehicles, had gone seeking POL at Hammam. He found none there, nor at [Burg el Arab](#), but managed to obtain 10,000 gallons at Bahig. This load came in at 7.15 a.m. on 2 July and half of it was issued immediately to ASC units in the area. This completed the Division's refuelling, and left 25,000 gallons in hand. At 9 a.m. Colonel Crump held a conference of his company commanders and instructed that petrol would now be drawn from 86 FMG. Our Company was to have, by nightfall, 35,000 gallons on wheels in i and 2 Platoons.

These requirements were duly met; and next day Sam Burkitt, with sixteen three-tonners from i Platoon and three three-tonners from No. 2, gaily departed, at 6 a.m., for further loading at 86 FMC. But at a conference held at 10 a.m., Commander NZASC advised that owing to the tactical situation refilling that day was to be done at 91 FMC! At 10.30, therefore, Captain Latimer set out 'to recover or redirect 2/Lt Burkitt's convoy', since 86 FMC was now closed. However, when Latimer reached No. 86 he found that Burkitt's convoy had indeed loaded there, and was then heading for home with 11,880 gallons of petrol and two 3-ton loads of assorted oils.

That afternoon (3 July) Maurie Browne paid a visit to 91 FMC and found nothing in our line available there-not even petrol. At this time, also, there was an urgent need for MBO (mineral burning oil, alias kerosene) then being required by the Field Ambulances for hospitals; and

a special oil, which Ordnance was unable to supply, for the recoil mechanism of the 25-pounder guns. The six-pounder anti-tank guns, also, were needing MBO for their buffers. So Petrol Company was instructed to obtain these supplies at all cost. Having drawn a blank at 91 FMC, Forbes despatched Lance-Corporal Baldwin with a 3-ton lorry to Bahig, via Hammam, for MBO, gun oil and M 220, a vehicle lubricant used by **Divisional Cavalry**.

Next day petrol was again drawn from 86 FMC. That day, too, the water situation—always rather ‘iffy’ in the desert—was improved by the arrival of a **4 RMT** convoy from Alexandria (speeded on its way by Captain Torbet) which was guided in by MSM Williams of Petrol Company Workshops. There was great jubilation when Williams also delivered to the Company its first mail since **Syria**. Meanwhile Lance-Corporal Baldwin, unable to find what he wanted at Bahig, had been directed on to **Alexandria**, returning to the Company at 3 p.m. with a full load of the highly essential gun oils and MBO.

These examples are typical of Petrol Company's problems and activities in early July, while the two armies locked together in a desperate struggle—the one to break the thinly-held **Alamein** line and so achieve a world-shaking victory, the other to hold on in a back-to-the-wall effort to avert catastrophe.

Rommel began by attempting to envelop the **Alamein Box**. On 1 July he thrust at the gap to the south of it, but this move was thwarted by the South Africans. At the same time he mounted a heavy assault with tanks and artillery against 18 Indian Brigade at Deir el Shein, in the area between the South Africans and the New Zealanders, in an effort to get in behind **13 Corps**.

After some hours of fighting, the Deir el Shein positions were overrun and the enemy penetrated strongly. The situation for Eighth Army now looked extremely grave. Plans were made for a further deep withdrawal, with the South Africans retiring on **Alexandria** and our Division falling back towards **Cairo**. We would then make a last stand at

the **Wadi Natrun**.

But this plan, fortunately, was never needed. On 2 July our Division formed mobile gun columns and struck northward at the enemy's flank. Heavy blows were delivered, too, by the British armour, which knocked out many German tanks. Next day 4 Brigade, with 4 and 5 NZ Field Regiments, attacked and crippled the 'crack' Italian *Ariete Armoured Division*, capturing 350 prisoners and 44 guns. On the same day 5 Brigade struck north-west against the enemy flank at El **Mreir**.

Petrol Company knew little of these aggressive actions. There were rumours, of course; but real information was meagre indeed. For our drivers, early July brought hectic days and noisy nights. Bombing and strafing went on continually, with dogfights overhead and the **RAF** and the *Luftwaffe* both vigorously active. So, too, were the flies. And one perspiring Petrol Company driver, weary of fighting the insects for his food, threw his dixie in the sand and shouted: 'There, you B—s; take the flaming lot!' With in-the-shade temperatures reaching 110 degrees, tempers were apt to rise accordingly.

Tank and artillery battles raged around-and sometimes across-the Divisional Petrol Company locations. The fluid situation caused many moves (some in hot haste, as enemy columns hove in sight) and frequent changes in the issuing and refilling points. Heavy night dews and early morning mists saturated the men's bedding-usually only a blanket or two-and then, soon after, came the blazing sun, baking everything and everyone. Our Company's main concern in those critical days was to maintain the Division at its maximum mobility; and to this end the Company always carried in each of its two operating platoons 18,000 gallons of POL 'on wheels'.

On 6 July, at midnight, a message reached Company Headquarters advising that the **Divisional Cavalry** was now equipped with General Stuart tanks, and that Petrol Company must henceforth carry 1000 gallons of high octane petrol-known to the Company as HOPS. This amount was picked up next day from the **Qattara** fortress, which then

held large stocks, and our loading of MT petrol was correspondingly reduced. On 8 July Workshops' No. 11 Section moved out for duty at **Maadi**, its tasks there including the maintenance of Divisional vehicles still operating at Base, and the formation of a collection centre, ex Tel-el-Kebir, for spare parts for all Divisional ASC units.

July the 8th brought increased air activity, and in one sharp dogfight a British fighter plane was shot down in the Petrol Company area. The aircraft exploded, scattering debris far and wide, with little trace left of the pilot. That afternoon Sam Burkitt's convoy of thirteen vehicles was severely shelled while reloading in Fortress A. He got his trucks away without mishap, but noticed when he left a large column of black smoke rising from the petrol dump. A direct hit, he concluded, had set fire to one of the pits.

Sam's load of petrol was the last to come out of Fortress A. That afternoon 6 Brigade withdrew, leaving a rearguard. Next day this rear party also pulled out-and for most of the day the enemy staged a full-scale attack against the empty fortress. At 6 p.m. 25 of his tanks and 200 vehicles poured into the **Kaponga Box**.

So far in this campaign the Company had borne a charmed life, with no damage caused by enemy action to either man or vehicle. Some close shaves were experienced on 10 July when a column of trucks drove through our area at 5.30 a.m., narrowly missing many sleepers, who preferred the 'safety' of the open desert to dossing down close to their loaded vehicles. This, it transpired, was no enemy raid, but a convoy from our own Divisional Ammunition Company; and the remarks hurled by Petrol Company drivers at the departing heads of their Ammo 'cobbers' were both choice and explicit.

That afternoon the Company received pay—their first since **Syria**-at the rate of thirty shillings per man. So at last one was able to settle one's debts, bets and poker losses. But with so much spending power and so few consumer goods there was only one way to beat inflation: a truck was sent to Alex for canteen and mess supplies. But, the stern order

admonished, 'definitely no liquor'-and this at the height of a hot desert summer!

Still, the war at that stage was not entirely 'dry'. For already the Divisional Supply Company, as Bates records in his unit history, 'had begun to supplement its normal ration work by bringing up welcome cargoes of beer, cigarettes and other luxury items from Alexandria'. He adds: 'The daily issue now included rum, and in general the rations were good. A sample, issued on 21 July: sixteen ounces of M and V, twelve ounces of bread, four ounces of sausages, two ounces of tinned fruit, one ounce of margarine, three ounces of sugar, two ounces of milk, one ounce of cheese, three-quarters of an ounce of tea, and ten cigarettes. Beer was also a regular item, but was a charge against unit funds and was not an issue. Later in the month fresh limes were issued. An unusual demand from the troops was quicklime; the Italians had buried the dead just below the sand, and the stench was bringing in hordes of already insufferable flies. Lime was issued on 31 July.'

On 14 July Petrol Company's clean casualty sheet suffered a smudge when eighteen Stukas bombed and machine-gunned the replenishment area. No. 1 Platoon were there at the time, and once again our men came off unscathed. Several Company vehicles, however, were damaged by splinters, the worst being the QM truck (from Headquarters Platoon) which had gone with the convoy to the replenishment area to bring back water. Other units were much less fortunate, their casualties from this raid totalling twenty-one killed and about fifty wounded. Petrol Company's efficient vehicle dispersal undoubtedly saved them, then, as on other occasions. Three days later another bombing raid, by Junkers 88s, about a mile from the Company area, wounded several Divisional Ammunition men, including Second-Lieutenant Cording, formerly a sergeant in Petrol Company.

Though altogether an uncomfortable month, July 1942 lacked nothing in excitement. Heavy gun battles raged to the north of us; bombings and dogfights were daily affairs; while every night the RAF roared overhead on their regular two-way 'bus-route'. British tanks

sometimes trundled through our lines to get more quickly at promising targets-and sometimes they drew from the enemy armour streams of spectacular but quite unpleasant tracer. Prisoners of war were now included in our loads-mostly Italians.

At one stage Petrol Company also carried 'walking wounded', from an MDS north-west of the Company area. Urgent and serious cases were then being evacuated by the **RAF** in flying ambulances-Bombays and De Havillands. At 9.20 a.m. on 24 July, two Bombays were seen approaching the MDS and coming in to land. At that moment several Messerschmitts appeared, some remaining at a considerable height-watching for intercepting Spitfires-while one swooped down in vicious attack. Both Bombays succeeded in landing, though one had obviously been badly shot up. Another spurt of bullets set it ablaze. The ME then made several runs at the second **Bombay**, and it, too, burst into flames. Neither of our planes carried **Red Cross** markings. Their crews were able to get away safely before the aircraft caught fire.

Later that month came another severe raid, vividly described in a letter by Maurie Browne:

We had a Hell of a time a couple of nights ago. I awoke with a singing in my ears and a burning all over me. Couldn't make it out until I realised it was *mosquitoes*. There were millions of them, and they routed the whole Division! I had the mistaken idea that I was the only one being nipped-until I saw young Jack ² hop out of his bed and go tearing off into the sand, waving his arms and smacking himself.

They were all anopheles, and had evidently been blown up from the Delta in a windstorm. I had never seen a mossaie before in the desert proper, and couldn't believe it. The only consolation was that the Hun must have got as many as we did and may not feel so keen about Egypt now. They have all blown away again, but we're still scratching the bites and hoping we don't get malaria.

The Hun, indeed, was anything but keen about Egypt by then, and

still less were his reluctant allies, the Italians. By the time Rommel's troops reached **Alamein** they were already dog-tired from constant fighting, constant travelling, and lack of rest. The iron will of their Commander drove them on. But when his plans misfired, and hopes of a rapid victory vanished, his men became dispirited. Even in the famous **Africa Corps** morale ran low; for this was not (as many suppose) a *corps d'élite* of picked and seasoned troops. They were, in fact, just run-of-the-mill recruits, and some were quite new to desert fighting. They were now at the end of inordinately long supply lines, which brought only a trickle of the food, the guns, the tanks, the reinforcements and the petrol that they needed-especially the petrol.

In the desert, Rommel's order of priority had always been (1) petrol and oil, (2) water, (3) food, (4) prisoners. And Brigadier Young relates ³ that, at a conference with the Supreme Command in **Italy** that month, Rommel complained bitterly about being halted for lack of petrol. Three tankers had just been sunk in two days. Marshal Cavallero was at pains to reassure the German C-in-C: other means had already been adopted to keep him supplied. Petrol was being sent over in the double bottoms of hospital ships! Rommel, it is said, exploded in indignation.

Later, at a conference with **Hitler** himself, Rommel told the Fuehrer that his panzers were 'standing at the door of **Alexandria**' but that it was impossible to push it open unless they were reinforced and the supply position improved. Above all, they could do nothing without petrol. **Hitler** then produced another brainwave: the mass production of very small shallow-draught vessels, like landing craft, armed with two 88-milli- metre guns each, and much more difficult targets than tankers. These, **Hitler** assured him, would be able to slip across the **Mediterranean** at night, and by means of them the petrol problem would be solved. This plan, of course, was never carried out.

By the middle of July we had taken the enemy's measure. The tide of battle ebbed and flowed, but Eighth Army stood firm on the **Alamein** line. There were even plans for a great British counter-thrust to reach the coast at **Daba** and **Fuka**. That would have 'boxed' the enemy's

forward elements and cut his lines of communication. But apart from a daring raid on **Fuka** airfield, by a motorised column which shot up installations and planes on the ground, this plan came to nothing. And Auchinleck's edict of 5 July that 'Eighth Army will attack and destroy the enemy' turned out to be so much wishful thinking.

For our Division July was a month of triumphs and disasters. The destruction of the Italian ***Ariete Armoured Division*** on 3 July was, says Lieutenant-Colonel Scoullar, 'an outstanding episode in the Dominion's military history.... It seriously disconcerted both Germans and Italians and made the latter more fearful in subsequent conflicts with the New Zealanders. It increased German distrust of the fighting qualities of their allies and Italian cynicism concerning Rommel's leadership. It was possibly one of the main factors which led Rommel to plan an operation with the sole purpose of eliminating the New Zealand Division.'⁴

Then, on the night of 14-15 July, came the spirited capture of **Ruweisat Ridge** by our 4 and 5 Infantry Brigades, with 5 Indian Brigade on one flank. Our men carved their way through strongly-held enemy positions, dealing heavy punishment and taking masses of prisoners. Enemy tanks, prowling in the dark, were attacked by intrepid infantrymen, who destroyed several with 'sticky' bombs, or by shooting the tank commander and then climbing aboard to drop hand grenades on the crew inside. The remaining tanks withdrew in confusion.

But daylight quickly changed the picture. British tanks, expected by then to give support, were not on hand. Artillery moving up behind 5 Brigade met unforeseen delays. To dig in on Ruweisat's rocky outcrop was virtually impossible. So when the German armour counter-attacked in 5 Brigade's rear that morning, many of the infantry were caught in a hopeless position. The brigade sustained severe casualties, and almost the whole 22 Battalion was captured.

Fourth Brigade, which had reached its position on the ridge with twenty-one anti-tank guns, suffered even more severely, first from enemy mortars and artillery, which shelled incessantly throughout the

day, then from a swift onslaught late in the afternoon by tanks and armoured cars. These made short work of our anti-tank weapons and their gallant crews, leaving the infantry defenceless. Most of the survivors of 19 and 20 Battalions went into the 'bag', including Captain **Upham**,⁵ Whose heroic exploits that day, and at **Minqar Qaim**, gained him a bar to his Victoria Cross.

On the credit side, we had killed large numbers of Germans and Italians and brought back 1600 prisoners. At one stage 5 Brigade alone had over 4000 in hand, while 4 Brigade probably took even more. Its commander (Brigadier **Burrows**⁶) estimates that there were 20,000 prisoners for the taking' when he reached the ridge at daylight. With proper tank support this action could have crippled Rommel's army. Captured material included 12 88-millimetre guns, 43 other field guns, 60 anti-tank guns and mortars, and 'automatics beyond counting'.

That night (15-16 July) the surviving units were withdrawn and consolidated on a low ridge some 1200 yards south of Ruweisat. Sixth Brigade came up from reserve and extended the line. The remnants of 22 Battalion and of 4, Brigade (excepting 18 Battalion which now joined 5 Brigade) were withdrawn to **Maadi**. That same week another night attack was ordered, with 6 Brigade going in this time (21 July) against strong enemy positions at El Mreir. And again, for the same reason-lack of the promised tank support-disaster overtook us. Within a few days all three New Zealand infantry brigades had suffered drastic losses.⁷

During this period a kind of 'uneasy peace' settled down over the rear areas. Petrol Company's two operating platoons worked in echelon on alternate days, allowing four vehicles from the disengaged platoon to be in workshops daily for routine inspection and check-over. The possibility of sudden moves (Eighth Army still seemed to be 'looking over its shoulder' to alternative positions some miles farther back) precluded Workshops from opening up on a full scale. So a policy developed during this campaign of conducting Workshops operations well to the rear.

No. 11 Section, under Staff-Sergeant O'Connor, had gone back to

Maadi on 8 July. Four days later, Colonel Crump ordered blacksmiths and their gear to be sent to Divisional Ordnance Workshops at Hammam, to make vehicle springs for our Company. On 31 July he further instructed that one section of Workshops, plus one clerk from Company Headquarters, would set up shop at **Amiriya**. Thus only Workshops Headquarters and one of its sections remained with the Company.

For July 1942 Petrol Company's running aggregated 71,616 miles, with a petrol consumption of 10,781 gallons. In that month POL issues were: Petrol, 339,518 gallons; Oils: M 220, 3738 gallons; G 600, 2226 gallons; M 160, 1615 gallons; Hypoid, 180 gallons; HBF, 32 gallons: total, 7791 gallons. Grease, GS, 2439 lb. AGO, 1669 gallons. MBO, 2054 gallons. Petrol issues for the campaign to date totalled 401,518 gallons.

On 9 July the Company issued petrol to an extraordinary total of 19,070 gallons-a fact which disturbed Commander NZASC, who called for a report on the amounts drawn by each unit. This aggregate, however, was not inconsistent with the Division's voracious requirements of POL for night moves, and accords with the amounts drawn during the Western Desert campaigns of September-December 1941.

POL ISSUES FOR 9 JULY 1942

From Petrol Point

| | | | | | |
|--------------------|------|-----------------------------|-----|----------------------|------|
| 23 Bn | 600 | 33 Bty, 7 A-Tk Regt | 200 | 21 Bn | 600 |
| HQ 4 Bde | 300 | 4 Fd Amb | 240 | 22 Bn | 1000 |
| 27 Bn | 128 | 32 Bty, 7, A-Tk Regt | 300 | NZ Div Pro | 48 |
| HQNZDiv | 100 | 19 Bn | 600 | 5 Fd Amb | 200 |
| HQNZASC | 112 | HQ NZ Div (Rear) | 200 | HQ5InfBde | 300 |
| 18Bn | 1280 | 31 i Bty, NZA | 400 | NZ Div Cav | 1600 |
| 5 Fd Regt | 1600 | 28 Bn | 700 | 4 RMT | 560 |
| 6 Fd Regt | 1440 | 8 Fd Coy, NZE | 8 | 6 Fd Coy, NZE | 200 |
| NZ Div Sigs | 500 | 41 Lt AA Btv | 584 | 4 Fd Regt | 2400 |

Total issues at PP: 16,200 gals

Issues in area from No. 2

Pl:

Div Sup Coy 500 6 Res MT Coy 450 Div Amn Coy 704

Div Sup Coy 300 Div Sup Coy(3 Pl) 500

Total issues No. 2 Pl: 2,454 gals

Issues in area from No. 1 Pl:

HQ, Div Pet 120 Workshops Div Pet 96 4 Res MT 200

Total issues No. 1 Pl: 416 gals

9 Jul 42: Total issues by Coy: 19,070 gals

These figures gave the first true picture of the Division's POL usage in this campaign. They followed the regrouping of 4 and 5 Brigades during the night of 8-9 July, a maximum movement of not more than ten miles, made between the hours of 8.30 p.m. and 5.30 a.m. There was also the movement of the **Divisional Cavalry**, now using tanks. Before 8 July many units had been making independent drawings from Fortress A and other non-Petrol Company sources; so, until these 'dried up', no reliable estimate of actual petrol usage had been possible.

¹ **Capt J. S. Tomlinson; Levin**; born Dunedin, 7 Feb 1914; bank officer.

² **Dvr R. J. Carthy; Wanganui**; born Wanganui, 3 Oct 1916; car salesman; wounded 7 Jan 1943.

³ **Desmond Young, Rommel.**

⁴ **Battle for Egypt**, p. 167.

⁵ **Capt C. H. Upham**, VC and bar, m.i.d.; Conway Flat, Hundalee; born **Christchurch**, 21 Sep 1908; Government land valuer; wounded May 1941; wounded and p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

⁶ **Brig J. T. Burrows**, CBE, DSO and bar, ED, m.i.d., Order of Valour (Gk); **Christchurch**; born **Christchurch**, 14 Jul 1904; schoolmaster; CO **20 Bn** May 1941, Dec 1941-Jul 1942; **20 Bn** and Armd Regt Aug 1942-Jun 1943; comd **4 Bde** 27-29 Jun 1942, 5 Jul-15 Aug 1942; **5 Bde** Mar 1944, Aug-Nov 1944; 6Bde Jul-Aug 1944; Commander, Southern Military District, 1951-53;

Commander K Force, 1953-54; Commander, SMD, 1955-60.

⁷ In the Ruweisat action, Sergeant Keith Elliott, of 22 Battalion, won the Victoria Cross for a series of brilliant exploits.

PETROL COMPANY

CHAPTER 13 – EIGHTH ARMY CONQUERS

CHAPTER 13

Eighth Army Conquers

AFTER the costly encounters at Ruweisat and El Mreir, 5 and 6 Brigades settled down in static positions near those two features. Minefields were laid all round the area, which now became known as the **New Zealand Box**. Petrol Company ran a daily shuttle service to the rear of it, between the replenishment point at Deir Daayis and 86 FMC. On the return trip the trucks took back prisoners, walking wounded, and miscellaneous 'cargoes' as instructed by HQ Command NZASC.

This settled routine gave our driers time to improve their own defence arrangements, by digging better slit trenches, sandbagging the engines of stationary vehicles (cooks' trucks, QM truck, Headquarters office vehicle, Workshops vehicles, and so on) and attending to camouflage. The nets had not been used since **Syria**; for it was thought that even the dumbest enemy pilot would feel obliged to invest **Gate Patches** of vivid greenery (which the nets then represented) displayed in the open desert. Sand-coloured garnishing was drawn from Ordnance and all hands set to work on decorating.

These tasks proceeded, under trying conditions, in the early days of August, when temperatures ran extremely high, and the usual afternoon breeze served only to raise unpleasant clouds of dust and irritate the flies. Petrol Company's war diary notes that the insects were now at the height of their ferocity, and at their densest numerically. All manner of devices were employed against them, including some Heath Robinson contraptions invented (but never patented) by our zealous askaris, and the use of pet chameleons, whose quick-darting tongues accounted for quite a few. Meanwhile the men grew lean and gaunt, and there were many cases of jaundice. Workshops detachments carried on under somewhat better conditions at **Amiriya** and **Maadi**, though the former area was then receiving much attention by night from the **Luftwaffe**. This, and the noisy reprisals from the area's heavy barrage, made sleep impossible.

On 3 August Major Forbes departed for **Maadi** to conduct Courts of Inquiry, and Captain Washbourn took over as acting OC. When Forbes returned, on 7 August, he brought a pleasant surprise for his officers—a thermos flask full of ice-cream from Base, where both the Pie Factory and the Ice-cream Depot (**General Freyberg's** ‘pet babies’) were proving most popular. On 6 August came information that attacks were expected, by enemy parachutist, on our B Echelon transport; so Petrol Company stood-to between the hours of 5.30-6 a.m. and 8.10-9.30 p.m., with platoons and Headquarters instituting patrols.

But the expected ‘visitors’ failed to arrive. Next day there was much air activity over the Company area, with many thrilling duels and low-level sweeps by **RAF** fighters. One Petrol Company observer wrote: ‘Yesterday morning I had a pretty good view of one of the best dogfights ever. The only trouble was that some of the planes were very close to the ground and there was quite a bit of lead etc flying around. Some of our blokes broke all records in getting under trucks but I was too damned interested in seeing whether one of our fighters was going to land a “Schmidt” as he chased him down over our truck-tops—and I was quite disappointed when the Jerry got away. The air is full of planes most of the day and 99% of them are ours.’ This, of course, is an exaggeration. Nevertheless, the **RAF** was indeed gaining the ascendancy; and eventually so many Stukas were shot out of the skies that this once-dreaded attacker, with its screaming dives and its deadly bomb-loads, was seen no more over the **Western Desert**.

August 1942 brought vital changes in the command of Eighth Army. Prime Minister Churchill, and the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, ¹ worried about the way things were shaping in the desert, stopped over in Egypt while en route to **Moscow** and called at Army Headquarters. Shortly after this visit, Lieutenant-General B. L. Montgomery (‘bounding with self-confidence and capable of instilling this confidence to all those under his command’) was appointed Army Commander. He arrived in **Cairo** on 12 August. Three days later, Alexander replaced Auchinleck as C-in-C Middle East Forces, and from that time Eighth Army never looked

back.

Meanwhile our own GOC, now recovered from a neck-wound received at **Minqar Qaim**, had resumed command of **2 NZ Division**, a title allotted during the previous month to the Division in the field, when our men at Base became 6 New Zealand Division—all part of a deep, dark plot to fuzzle the enemy's Intelligence. In the second week of August came a most popular order: leave for all troops, by rotation, to **Cairo** or **Alexandria**. The first batch from Petrol Company left the **Western Desert** on 11 August, and soon most were wallowing in unaccustomed luxury.

‘We went into a pub’, writes one, ‘and had a feed of real fresh food—and did I enjoy it! Started off with a beer, then tomato soup, followed by filleted sole, then roast chicken, beans, chips and green peas, followed up with fruit salad and cream. We could hardly stagger out.’ The more abstemious went for bathes, shouted themselves haircuts, and let the street Arabs furbish their neglected footwear. Most men bought presents (with an eye to Christmas) for the folk back home.

Then, all too soon, it was ‘back to the blue’ again, to prepare for Rommel's next and last thrust against the **Alamein** line. Montgomery writes: ‘I understood Rommel was expected to attack *us* shortly. If he came soon it would be tricky, if he came in a week, all right, but give us two weeks and Rommel could do what he liked; he would be seen off and then it would be our turn. But I had no intention of launching *our* attack until we were ready; when that time came we would hit Rommel for six right out of **Africa**.’²

It was anticipated that Rommel would attack towards the end of the month, at the full-moon period, and that his main force would be directed at our southern flank. Such a move would menace the **New Zealand Box**; so this position was organised for defence in depth. More than a squadron of Valentine tanks came under **2 NZ Division** command, to support our infantry when we counter-attacked. As part of an arrangement to relieve the Division by 44 (British) Division, 5 Brigade was moved down to the southern area, its place in the north-west corner

of the Box being taken by 132 (British) Brigade, now under **2 NZ Division**'s command.

This change-over was completed on the night of 30-31 August, by which time Rommel had commenced his attack. Meanwhile Petrol Company had already 'met up' with men of the new Tommy division, now in the New Zealand area. On 15 August Commander NZASC instructed that **44 Division** was expected to arrive next day, and that NZASC was to provide it with all supplies, POL and water until it had settled in. Its 132 Brigade Group Company, RASC, was to come under the command of HQ NZASC and would be parked in NZASC's second-line area. All assistance was to be given to **44 Division**'s RASC, particularly with regard to desert warfare (which was new to them) and its application to motor transport. Certain officers and NCOs were to be detached from NZASC companies to help with this 'running in'. On 16 August Captain Briston, RASC, the Ammunition Officer of 132 Brigade Group Company, reported to Petrol Company's headquarters as advanced party for his company and was shown the area they would occupy, between our Divisional Ammunition and Divisional Petrol Companies. Nine days later Sergeant G. S. Williamson was detached on loan to 132 Brigade Group Company.

During the build-up for the expected battle Petrol Company took part in an exercise, on the night of 19-20 August, which involved refilling the Division's first-line transport by night. This was planned as a 'two-platoon job', with Lieutenant Browne taking charge of 1 Platoon (in addition to his duties as Divisional Petrol Officer) vice Captain Latimer, then away with a leave party. Prior to the exercise, platoon officers with their NCOs 'recced' the route, which ran via the 'C' track approximately north-west from 86 FMC to Bir el Themid, then south-west to the replenishment area at Point 106. The Company vehicles lay up in rendezvous during the late afternoon, then proceeded at 7.30 p.m. 'according to plan'. ³

In the preceding week a working party and six trucks from Petrol Company, under Staff-Sergeant **Parkin**, ⁴ had been busy laying down

dumps at various points to aid the general battle plan. By 15 August they had completed their programme, as follows: at **Alam Halfa** (two dumps), 3000 gallons MT plus oils and lubricants, 450 gallons HOP plus M 400; Bir Gaballa (two dumps), 1000 gallons MT plus oils and lubricants, 150 gallons HOP plus M 400; Alam el Khadim (three dumps), 6000 gallons MT plus oils and lubricants, 900 gallons HOP plus M 400. Another Petrol Company detachment, of ten trucks under CSM Cooper, helped with the transfer of troops during the last few days and nights of August, when 5 Infantry Brigade moved south and was replaced by 132 Brigade of **44 Division**.

Cooper had some interesting experiences, and his report is quoted further on. Meanwhile let us look at the general plan for the impending battle—‘the first and typical Montgomery battle’, as **Kippenberger** calls it, and the one which was to ‘see Rommel off’. Key feature in the plan was the **Alam Halfa** ridge, several miles to the rear of the **Alamein** line, and south-east from **Ruweisat Ridge**.

From the reports of his Intelligence staff Montgomery expected that after a break-in on the southern flank the enemy would swing left and direct his armour towards the Alam Halfa and Ruweisat ridges. Montgomery therefore decided to hold the **Alam Halfa** ridge strongly with **44 Division** and place his own tanks in the area between its western end and the New Zealand positions in the main **Alamein** line. So, on the morning of 1 September, when the enemy wheeled north as anticipated, there were about 400 tanks dug in to meet him, protected by a screen of six-pounder anti-tank guns. This armour was not to move. The plan was for the enemy to beat up against it and suffer heavy casualties.

And that is exactly what happened. Montgomery had made his extreme south flank mobile, with **7 Armoured Division** there holding a wide front. When the attack came they were to give way before it and, after the enemy had wheeled, harass his rear and generally ‘shoot him up’ from the south and east. The **Desert Air Force**, assisted at night by flare-dropping aircraft of the **Fleet Air Arm**, also took a hand, adding to

the destruction. Within a few days Rommel had suffered so heavily in tanks and soft-skinned vehicles that he had to withdraw.

The enemy advance swept past to the south of the New Zealand positions in the early hours of 31 August. Our artillery opened up, and his replied. Apart from that, and frequent bombings throughout the day, Jerry left us unmolested. The Bofors in our area brought down several Stukas, while the **Desert Air Force**, now working in close co-ordination with the ground forces, pummeled the enemy's advancing columns mercilessly. That night the whole area was alight with flares, released by both air forces; and for the first time our troops, including Divisional Petrol Company, made the acquaintance of 'butterfly' bombs. These nasty little objects, about the size of cricket balls, scattered like peas from a metal 'pod' and then burst individually in a sputter of small explosions. Primarily anti personnel missiles, they were meant to bounce into dugouts and slit trenches.

For the next few days the pattern of events in the New Zealand sector showed little change. By 2 September the head of the enemy advance had passed well to the east of us. Jerry was taking a terrific pummeled from tanks, air, and artillery and had, in fact, by then shot his bolt. Slowly and stubbornly he began to pull back.

Montgomery ordered a southward thrust from the New Zealand area to try to close the gap in the minefields through which the enemy had penetrated. In this action, which commenced at 10.30 p.m. on 3 September, our Division with 132 Brigade of **44 Division** under command attacked positions held by the German *90 Light Division* and **Italy's Trieste Division**. Although 5 Brigade gained its objective—with 28 (Maori) Battalion again distinguishing itself—our other two brigades were held up. Heavy enemy counter-attacks next day were repulsed, but during the night (4-5 September) our infantry were withdrawn from their exposed positions.

By the evening of 5 September Rommel had pulled his main force back to the minefield area, where he turned to make a stand.

Montgomery called off the battle (at 7 a.m. on 7 September) and left him there. It suited our book to have Rommel's forces massed on the southern flank, because Eighth



Army's commander had already begun planning for his own big offensive, which would be launched farther north. Thus the Battle of **Alam Halfa ended in the way Montgomery wanted; and he quotes the German historian, von Mellenthin, who was on Rommel's staff at the time, as pronouncing this battle 'the turning point of the desert war, and the first of a long series of defeats on every front which foreshadowed the defeat of **Germany**'.**

Other incidents affecting Petrol Company that month included a leaflet raid on 1 Platoon during the night of Friday, 22 September; and next morning our drivers learned from the pamphlets that the Italians and the Germans had no quarrel with the New Zealanders, and that if we were in the war just for adventure we should go back to our homes which the English were taking from us. This and similar 'information' caused much mirth among our men and helped to raise their morale. The pamphlets were eagerly sought as souvenirs, and we hoped the enemy would send more.

On 25 August the **YMCA mobile canteen visited our lines; and their Mr Harry Lawson, who was attached to Divisional Petrol Company in **Syria** but had been wounded during the early part of this campaign, was welcomed back and attached for rations. Padre Holland also called that day. On the way his vehicle broke a spring, which our Workshops**

replaced. On 25 August, too, Driver R. D. **Janes**⁵ had his truck set on fire while loading petrol from the tray of a 'Mac' truck at 86 FMC. The fire originated in the 'Mac', but Janes's load of petrol was quickly ablaze. Strenuous efforts by NCOs and drivers of No. 1 Platoon saved the vehicle and part of its load, damage being confined to paintwork, a burnt canopy and two spare tyres. To cap this day another flight of mosquitoes, wind-borne from the south, launched a full-scale attack after dark.

REPORT BY WO I A. B. COOPER ON TRANSPORT DETAIL, 29-31 AUGUST, 1942

29 Aug.

Left Coy area with 10 × 3 ton lorries of No 1 Pl at 1535 hrs. Arrived at junction of 'Y' track, the rendezvous for the convoy at 1555 hrs. By this time had picked up 14 × 3 ton lorries of 4 NZ Res MT Coy, who followed my trucks to the rendezvous. Here 7 × 3 ton Sup Coy lorries were met. Capt **Pool**,⁶ who met the convoy at this point, informed me that in the absence of 2/Lt **Rich**⁷ (4 Res MT) I would be responsible for taking the convoy forward to the north-east gap in the minefields, 11 miles from Rear Div junction, where we were to be met by **22 Bn** guide. Left rendezvous 1620 hrs. Picked up 2/Lt Rich at 1650 hrs along 'Y' track. Changed on to 'Z' track at 1700 hrs and continued on until reaching the north-east gap in the minefields at 1740 hrs, where we were met by **22 Bn** guide. Moved into Bn area at 1750 hrs. We were then informed the changeover was cancelled but we were to stand by. 2/Lt Rich contacted GSO 1, who instructed that we were to stay the night and probably all the following day. He stated that CNZASC had been informed and was in complete agreement. Rations would be brought forward following day. Lorries were then further dispersed and we settled in for the night. I queried the POL situation of the convoy, and found this had been taken care of. At 2145 hrs the Artillery started a barrage. Much to our dismay we discovered we had parked amongst a battery of 25-pounders, and sleep was out of the question. Orders could be heard plainly being given by GPO to Sec Comdrs and from them to the guns. They were apparently using a new flashless powder, for all was in

complete darkness throughout the firing and the only thing to be seen was the flash of shells exploding ahead. It seemed as though batteries took turns at putting down the barrage as firing from the battery alongside us lasted only about 4 minutes, and then passed off down the line to another battery. Later our neighbours took up the role again.

30 Aug.

Reveille 0620 hrs. A series of all types of weapons going off all round us, the nearest being a matter of feet away, made a very rude awakening. Breakfasted with 'C' Coy **22 Bn** at 0730 hrs. Rather a late hour, but fires cannot be lit to arrange breakfast any earlier. Mr Rich informed me he was moving back to Coy area and would be back about 1200 hrs. About 1000 hrs a few German recce planes with fighter escort appeared over the area. All AA guns in neighbourhood opened up, including Bofors, but met with no success. At 1215 hrs received orders to leave, and at 1230 hrs moved out of area to pick up **132 Bde** (4 and **5 Royal West Kents**, and 2nd Buffs). Task should be completed 10-11 p.m., when 5 NZ Inf Bde would take us over. All vehicles were ordered to rendezvous at **22 Bn** when task finished. At this time I was riding in the rear truck, the convoy being led by an officer from **132 Bde** HQ acting as guide. On catching up with this officer I found that he had directed the vehicles to three Bns with guides, but could not give me any information as to the whereabouts of the Bns. However, I contacted **132 Bde** HQ and ascertained the locations of the Bns. At **4 Royal West Kents** I located eight 4 Res MT vehicles. I arranged lunch for them and instructed them as to the RV position and what their tasks would be. Continued on to **5 Royal West Kents**, where I found 9 vehicles (7 Sup Coy, 2 RMT). Thence to **2 Buffs**, where we picked up 2/Lt Rich and 11 vehicles (10 Pet Coy, 1 Res MT). Repeated arrangements, and then had lunch. Four vehicles had been detached earlier on an undisclosed task, and three of these were located at HQ **132 Bde** and the other at **2 Buffs**, so all vehicles were accounted for. Pet Coy vehicles loaded in Buffs area and proceeded three miles on a bearing of 243°. Load carrying between old and new areas continued for remainder of afternoon until 1715 hrs. Where possible

vehicles were backloaded in an endeavour to save time on night's task. Moved to 'C' Coy, forward Coy of 21st Bn at 0600 hrs. The artillery started their 'hymn of hate', apparently a safeguard to keep the enemies' heads down while the forward Coys changed over. Lifted 'C' Coy at 1900 hrs and proceeded to new area, arriving 1950 hrs. Both tasks now completed, I collected 7 Pet Coy trucks, two being still on detail (one of which had finished earlier and been sent to **22 Bn** area). Left for RV, **22 Bn** at 2030 hrs, arriving 2120 hrs. At 2145 hrs the Artillery commenced a proper show, and were firing from all sides of us. Both the **RAF** and the **Luftwaffe** joined in later, and the enemy, not to be outdone, opened up with their artillery.

31 Aug.

Sleep impossible with shelling and bombing, and at about 0300 hrs artillery (which had moved into the area we were occupying) opened up for an hour or so, then some guns switched about to the rear of us. Found out later that 20 enemy tanks had broken through. Reveille 0620 hrs, breakfast 0700 hrs. Picked up the truck which had been sent early previous night to **22 Bn**, leaving one vehicle short. After being assured by 2/Lt Rich that he would look after the latter truck as he had still to collect 10 of his own and the Sup Coy vehicles, I left with 9 × 3 ton on return journey to Coy. Met our missing vehicle which then joined my convoy. Arrived back in Coy area 0940 hrs. There was no mechanical trouble experienced during the whole detail.

The 'Y' track mentioned in CSM Cooper's report was a narrow, bumpy road which led to the replenishment area. At 7.30 a.m. on 1 September, Lieutenant Browne set off along this track with 2 Platoon; but they were soon held up by enemy shelling. Some 400 yards to the left, 'Z' track was being heavily bombed, as was the **Alam Halfa** feature 800 yards away on the right.

Lieutenant Browne drove through to Rear Divisional Headquarters, where he was told that units were to go forward as usual to the replenishment area and to pass the point being shelled as quickly as

possible. But that wasn't so easy. Already a Divisional Supply convoy blocked the track ahead of Petrol Company's platoon. Soft sand prevented dispersal, and trucks had to move in single file. Speeding up was out of the question, at least until the track ahead was clear. With so many Jerry planes about, the situation was decidedly sticky.

Shelling ceased as the Petrol Company convoy moved forward; but it was again held up by blast and shrapnel from the nearby bombing. Eventually 2 Platoon safely reached the replenishment area, where its vehicles were sorted out and a petrol point established at 10.30 a.m. The point closed at 11.30 and the convoy returned to Company Headquarters without further incident. There Major Forbes advised that **Rear Divisional Headquarters**, after coming under fire from 5.9s and 25-pounders, had moved to a new position between 'Y' and 'Z' tracks. No. 86 FMC had also shifted, some 16 miles north-east, to a more comfortable position near **Burg el Arab**. That afternoon 2 Platoon refilled from the new location, where the POL Section, our war diary records, 'was actually located on the reference given'.

By this time the German advance had got well under way. Hostile tanks, guns and lorried infantry could be seen moving up; the noise of battle clamoured all round—unpleasantly close to Petrol Company. That evening the Company was placed in a state of readiness to move, in case the enemy broke through. But a week later we were still in our old positions, with the operating platoons doing 'business as usual', and supplying POL to the same replenishment area. By 5 September, No. 86 FMC had come back again to its former area.

The Company moved at 1.30 p.m. on 9 September under Captain Washbourn. Major Forbes had gone on ahead to 'recce' the new area. The day was hot, and a brisk breeze whipped up a blinding sandstorm. This, with the dust from the moving vehicles and the rough nature of the track, made the going extremely unpleasant. But spirits were high. Eighth Army, we knew, had won a smashing victory. The whole Division was pulling out for a rest, with prospects of leave to **Cairo** or Alex. This was to be followed by a stern period of training, and even sterner tasks

ahead. For the C-in-C was determined to lose no time in taking the offensive. His intention was to destroy the enemy in his present position, where he was farthest from his own bases and nearest to ours. A decision would be forced at **El Alamein**, where we would have the best opportunity of developing our full strength.

Already 300 Sherman tanks had arrived from **America**, so that we now had for the first time a tank which was equal in armour, armament and performance to the best tank in the **Africa Corps**. It was proposed to equip six armoured brigades with them. All told we would have almost double the number of the enemy tanks, and an infantry strength that was the greatest Eighth Army had yet put into the field. New British divisions were arriving in the Delta area, in addition to replacements for losses, thus enabling existing units to be brought up to strength. The New Zealand Division was reorganised into a 'new model' formation, with the British **9 Armoured Brigade** under command. Fourth Brigade had gone back to **Maadi** to become an armoured formation.

September and early October also saw a great build-up of Eighth Army's artillery, on which it was intended to rely heavily in the positional battle ahead. All this was backed by seasoned administrative staffs, and by a vast 'rear services' army comprising 300,000 base troops, half a million civilian employees, and contracted labour to the tune of about another million and a half. The RAF had established complete air superiority, while both it and the **Royal Navy** played havoc with enemy shipping bound for North African ports.

Such were the preparations for the great **Alamein** battle; and Eighth Army's chances had never looked brighter. We now had the men, the materials and the leaders; and already we had had—in the **Alam Halfa** engagement—a goodly taste of victory. Thoroughness was the keynote to all our preparations, and troops were trained under conditions and on terrain similar to those they would find in the actual battle.

Petrol Company shared in the training and preparations, including a vast complex movement of vehicles and 'dummies' designed to deceive

the enemy concerning the time and place of the coming attack. After ten days of sweet dalliance by the sea near **Burg el Arab**, the bulk of the Company returned to the desert, where a detachment had remained on petrol supply duties. There, also, went Workshops Headquarters and their No. 11 Section, which was replaced at **Maadi** by No. 12. Workshops' Nos. 13 and 14 Sections resumed normal duty at HQ NZASC and **Amiriya** respectively.

Soon the Company was grappling with the details of a plan to replace 'flimsies' (the standard 4-gallon tin container) with pressed steel jerricans. This scheme commenced on 28 September when Corps made provision for the issue daily of 15,000 gallons in 3750 of the new containers. Our Company was allotted 11,000 gallons or 2750 cans, to be drawn from 200 FMC at 2 p.m. Loads were standardised at 640 gallons (160 cans) per lorry. But the Corps requirement that these cans be used in 'sets', with each set 'marching' to fixed points—second line, B Echelon, first line—and back again on fixed days, proved impracticable. It took no account of fluctuations in the daily demand for POL within the Division, and the fact that POL is not consumed like water, provided for and fixed as a daily ration.

Further confusion was caused by a **2 NZ Division** instruction (at variance with the Corps plan) which emphasised that ALL jerricans drawn by consuming units were to be returned to the petrol point on the day following issue from Divisional Petrol Company. As a result, some units returned FULL cans next day. These and other absurdities were eventually ironed out, and the returnable jerrican, with its many advantages, later came to stay.

On 3 October Captain **Butt**⁸ marched in to replace Captain Latimer, posted for a tour of duty at Base. The same day a freak hailstorm, with stones as large as pullets' eggs, sent drivers scurrying for shelter or their steel helmets. That day, also, was remembered by First Echelon men—survivors of the original 'Thirty-niners'—as the third anniversary of their entering camp in New Zealand. On 6 October the issue of an extra

blanket heralded the approach of yet another desert winter. On the 11th Captain F. Trewby returned to the Company, vice Captain Torbet, transferred to HQ Command NZASC.

From now on, harbingers of the impending battle came thick and fast. The Company drew stores, on 11 October, for three days' battle ration. All water tankers and trailers were filled (at [Amiriya](#)) and sealed as reserves, current needs being met by a daily issue, in tins, from a water-point. Commander NZASC advised that four trained anti-tank gunners were coming from Base for each NZASC Company, and that four anti-aircraft men from each Company would go back to take an anti-tank course.

On 17 October Petrol Company received orders to dump in a forward area, near Point 32, sufficient POL to take all the Division's tanks and carriers 50 miles. This was done next night by a No. 2 Platoon detail under Sergeant Jenkin, their load comprising 2500 gallons of MT petrol, 640 gallons HOP and a load of 'mixed oils'—M 400, M 220, C 600 and M 160. As the convoy approached the dumping area a light was seen flashing in the distance. This was thought to be a signal to guide some RASC transport following behind our own. It came, however, from a line of infantry, advancing in battle order in a northerly direction. Our convoy passed through without challenge, then drove on through a line of advancing tanks—again without being held up or shot up. Nine dumps were laid, each one-tin high, and dug in to half-tin depth. They were covered first with dunnage, then sand. While this was proceeding, as instructed, 'under cover of darkness', there was no lack of light from the flares sent up by the troops continuing their manoeuvres all round the area.

From the middle of October the Company was kept much on the move—all part of the 'giant deception' plan to mask the build-up for our coming offensive and conceal the true location of units and formations now moving up to their battle positions. At each move, Petrol Company took over an area vacated by portions of either 8 or 9 Armoured Brigades, and our vacated areas were taken over by the armoured units.

Sometimes we fozzled ourselves; as, for example, during the heavy dust-storm of 16 October.

By 2.30 p.m. this had blotted out everything. And the OC, in attempting to reach his Company Headquarters orderly room, travelled between Divisional Supply Company (to our north) and Divisional Ammunition Company (to the south) without striking Divisional Petrol Company at all! Another officer started out at 5.30 p.m. in his PU, seeking the officers' mess—a distance of 50 yards. He missed his objective, travelled from one neighbouring unit to another without encountering any Petrol Company vehicle, and finished up two hours later—back at his own tent! Every desert soldier, of course, can recall some like experience (not always due to grog) of 'travelling in a circle' and ending at or near the point where he began.

When the Company finished shuffling around, on 23 October, its headquarters was located beside the railway line near Burg el Arab. Throughout that day, and the previous one, fighter sweeps moved westward continually, and after our arrival aircraft continued to pass over throughout the night. Petrol Company's war diary notes that 'a terrific artillery bombardment was heard from 2100 hrs⁹ onward'. For our men in the desert, another 'show' had started. For a world, tensely waiting, this signalled the commencement of the crucial [El Alamein](#) battle.

Details of that battle are now well known; its classic phases of break-in, dogfight, break-out and pursuit have often been described. And all, at first, went 'merry as a marriage bell'. The New Zealand Division fought as a spearhead, helping [30 Corps](#) to punch a narrow hole through the deep German defences in the north. Petrol Company's No. 2 Platoon, under Captain Washbourn, ran a 24-hour petrol point service for the Division, at the site of its forward dump, first using up the dumped petrol there, then refilling each truck as emptied by reloading at 14 L of C. On several successive nights bombs were dropped to the north and south of the dump area; and although 2 Platoon increased their dispersal

to 250 yards between vehicles, some trucks were struck and slightly damaged by splinters.

No. 1 Platoon, meantime, remained fully loaded in the Company's rear area at **Burg el Arab**, ready to move forward when called on. Sports gear was unpacked, goalposts erected. The Company played football, cricket, baseball, staging inter-platoon contests; meanwhile one of the world's great epic dramas was being enacted less than 40 miles away.

By the end of October there was still little change in Petrol Company's situation. ¹⁰ In the battle area the 'break in' had succeeded; the 'dogfight' was proceeding; plans for the 'break out' were under way. In this, **2 New Zealand Division**, with two British infantry brigades under command, was again allotted a leading role. Operation **SUPERCHARGE**, launched at 1.5 a.m. on 2 November, was a brilliant success, the attack proceeding, **General Freyberg** says, 'like a drill'. ¹¹ It was supported by the greatest artillery concentration yet laid on in North Africa, and by aggressive fighter and bomber action by the **RAF**.

Next day there were signs that the enemy was beginning to crack. **General Freyberg** personally reconnoitred the front, where he saw a great change. The **Divisional Cavalry** reported the enemy to be moving back in the north; everything seemed to point to a general withdrawal. And so confident was our General of the enemy's undoing that he cabled this opinion to the **New Zealand Government**. At 2.15 p.m. the Division was warned to 'prepare to take part in a mobile operation'. Next day (4 November) the Division struck westward, moving through unmistakable signs of a defeated enemy—burnt-out vehicles, abandoned headquarters, tanks and guns destroyed, large and small groups of prisoners marching eastward under escort. The enemy had cracked, and the pursuit was on. A badly-beaten Rommel was being 'seen off'; and that afternoon he lost the commander of his **Africa Corps** (General von Thoma), captured while trying to ascertain just exactly what was going on.

Like hounds on the scent, mobile elements of Eighth Army raced westward, the intention being to outflank the retreating enemy from the

south. **Baltimore** bombers and fighter squadrons of the **Desert Air Force** attacked transport columns withdrawing along the main road north of the escarpment. Our Division now was not to get itself too heavily involved, but to try to head the enemy off and bottle him at **Fuka**. To aid this movement, and subsequent ones, Petrol Company's load-carrying capacity was stepped up by attachments from the RASC and from 4 and 6 Reserve MT Companies. Thus when the pursuit began we had in all 78 load-carriers, increased shortly afterwards to 113.

On 3 November the Company moved up to the area of the forward petrol point which 2 Platoon was still running south-west of **Alamein** railway station. There 1 Platoon made petrol issues to quit stocks that had been on their trucks for some time. At this stage jerricans had not yet come into general use, and there was still considerable leakage from the 'flimsies'. At 3.30 a.m. the previous day Lieutenant Browne, with Sergeant **Faulkner**¹² and Driver **Streeter**¹³ (Don R), had taken thirteen trucks forward to establish another petrol point specially for refuelling AFVs. They arrived in the area at 7.15 a.m. and found it very congested with forward-moving traffic. Browne recalls that during breakfast, at 8.30, a large number of Me109s appeared and were immediately engaged by a heavy AA battery nearby. The noise of the gunfire caused some consternation and everyone jumped a few inches in the air when the first salvo went off unexpectedly. It was quite interesting, he remarks, to watch other people throughout the day who were caught unawares by a salvo!

For the next few days the Company, and the petrol points, strove to keep up with the westward-moving Division. Early in the afternoon of 5 November, Commander NZASC ordered all Petrol Company vehicles with full loads to assemble immediately for a move forward to Alam el Halif, about 11 miles south of **Galal**, where a replenishment area was to be opened at 5.30 p.m. next day. They joined a convoy of 200 ASC vehicles under the Senior Supply Officer (Major Bracegirdle) with an armed guard consisting of 4 Company, 27 (MG) Battalion, and three armoured cars. In their wake went Company HQ, Workshops, and all other Petrol Company

vehicles except the 'empties' which Sergeant Jenkin had taken back for a refill at 202 FMC.

Bracegirdle's convoy struck heavy going. Owing to the congestion of traffic on all routes leading west it got away to a late start. The night was pitch-black, moonless. Lieutenant Browne records: 'Moved through minefields in shocking conditions with transport everywhere and dust and darkness completely obliterating vehicles in front. Eventually got through minefields and found half of Coy had gone astray. Capt Butt went back to find them. Major Bracegirdle decided to stage for night.'

By then it was midnight and the main convoy had advanced along the Boomerang track as far as the Divisional axis turn-off. Gunpits and slit trenches everywhere made further progress hazardous. While entering Petrol Company's staging area a No. 1 Platoon truck ran over a land mine which blew a front wheel off. The driver was uninjured. Shortly afterwards, Second-Lieutenant MacShane's jeep ran over a mine, resulting in the death of that popular and promising young officer, and slightly injuring his driver, 'Hori' Perston. A noisy night followed, with enemy aircraft active, and sundry arms in the neighbourhood retaliating. One bomb fell in Petrol Company's area, peppering the QM truck with shrapnel and blowing CQMS 'Lew' Asher's bivvy tent in on top of him as he lay in a slit trench.

On the morning of 6 November, Petrol Company held a large but informal parade to pay their last respects to Second-Lieutenant MacShane. A grave was made in the area and a padre conducted the burial service. Major Bracegirdle's convoy then resumed its march, reaching Alam el Halif at 11.30 a.m.

Our drivers dispersed their vehicles in the replenishment area, dug slit trenches and prepared a meal. They then settled down to the usual business of maintenance while awaiting the arrival of the customers. For although the Division had stocked up for about 200 miles before leaving the **Alamein** area, it would now need every available drop of 'juice' for the big hunt westward. The convoy issued 13,700 gallons of

petrol, besides rations and water, and the replenished B Echelon vehicles then set out to return to their units.

Lieutenant Browne departed with the empty ASC trucks to refill from 204 FMC at **El Daba**. Heavy rain had fallen and left the ground very sodden. The trucks took three hours to reach **Galal**. There they staged for the night and were bombed, without mishap to men or vehicles, although incendiaries, 'butterfly' and anti-personnel missiles were dropped. At first light on 7 November Browne moved on to 204 FMC and reloaded. There he learned that **2 NZ Division** was now under 10 Corps, and that the best way back to Halif was via **Fuka**. Arriving there, he found it impossible to get his vehicles through to the desert owing to water covering the low-lying ground. He decided to disperse his transport on the **Fuka** aerodrome while he set out alone for the Advanced Division replenishment area. He found Captain Butt six miles south of the replenishment point 'in shocking conditions, all vehicles being stuck'. He then returned to **Fuka** aerodrome, arriving at 11.59 p.m. after being held up in traffic.

Meanwhile the balance of Petrol Company, led by Lieutenant Burkitt, moved up on 7 November to establish a petrol point in the **Baggush** landing-ground area. Major Forbes had reconnoitred ahead, trying to contact Browne's detachment. Rain fell throughout the journey and many trucks became bogged. Nevertheless, the Company's load-carriers succeeded in reaching the appointed area, and opening their petrol point with a stock of 43,000 gallons, by 4 p.m. By nightfall neither Browne nor Forbes had returned to Company Headquarters, so Burkitt dispersed his vehicles as best he could, in a sea of mud.

That day Major Bracegirdle's column, which still included a number of Petrol Company vehicles, was struggling on from Alam el Halif in an effort to join our Company at the replenishment area by 3 p.m. as ordered. When it became clear that he could not keep this assignation, owing to the condition of the ground, Bracegirdle was instructed by HQ **2 NZ Division** to guide unit and brigade representatives to the Petrol Company vehicles; these representatives were then to guide the NZASC

petrol-carriers to units so that issues could be made in unit lines. For the Division (also bogged down) was by now desperately short of petrol. None had been drawn on 7 November from our Company's petrol point by first-line transport; and the B Echelon vehicles which had replenished the previous day at Alam el Halif had not yet returned to their units. They too had got stuck in the prevailing mud and slush.

Eventually, by one means and another, all units of 2 NZ Division received petrol and rations before resuming their westward advance on 8 November. But the weather, obviously, had played into Rommel's hands, bogging down three Eighth Army divisions and saving his *Panzer Army* from likely annihilation. The pursuit was resumed by Eighth Army's **10 Corps, which, as we have seen, now included **2 NZ Division**. Lieutenant Browne's detachment got through to the Division just as it was beginning to move. He was able to serve 4 Field Regiment with 1800 gallons, and then had to 'tag along'. He found the going very bad, with vehicles, guns, etc., still getting stuck over a wide area. After moving eight miles in five hours he halted his convoy for the night.**

Early on 9 November, Browne caught up with Divisional Ammunition Company and supplied 1800 gallons. He then plugged on through soft going and overtook the rest of the Division about five miles east of the **Siwa Track. There Lieutenant-Colonel **Hillier**¹⁴ (AA & QMG) instructed him to go on through the Division and give petrol to any units that were short. Next morning his convoy reloaded with 8000 gallons from No. 103 Petrol Depot in **Matruh**, after which they rejoined the Company, now concentrating at Kilo 120, on the main road near 208 FMC. Before dawn on 11 November, 110 men of 21 Battalion stormed the formidable **Halfaya Pass** and surprised an enemy rearguard still holding out there. At the cost of only two casualties our men took 612 prisoners and all their equipment.**

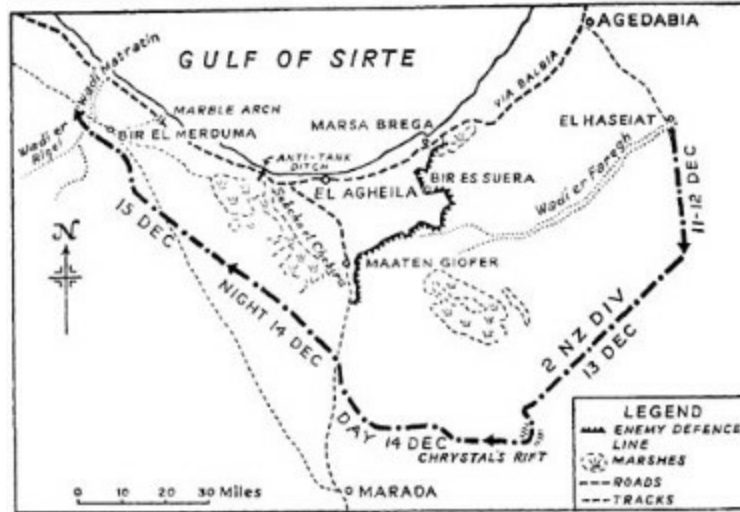
Thus ended the enemy's last attempt at resistance in this phase of the campaign. The frontier posts of **Sollum, Capuzzo, Bardia, and Sidi Azeiz were not contested. In the space of a week Eighth Army had**

chased the enemy right out of Egypt; and while armoured forces continued the pursuit, our Division stayed put in the **Bardia** area for reorganisation and training. News of another great success—the landing in North-West **Africa** of a large Anglo-American force under General Eisenhower, added to our elation. As these troops moved up and Eighth Army pressed westward, the enemy stood to be caught in the closing jaws of a gigantic pincer.

For several weeks Petrol Company remained in an area midway between **Bardia** and **Fort Capuzzo**. On 13 November Staff-Sergeant O'Connor marched out to Base, as a candidate for OCTU. On the 15th, Petrol Company's war diary noted that 'continual streams of transport now passing through Coy HQ area as a short-cut to the **Trigh Capuzzo** make Coy HQ like Willis Street on a Friday night. HQ Orderly Room now an information bureau, judging by the constant streams of all nationalities requesting advice as to the location of their units.' Three days later Company Headquarters, still craving privacy, moved a quarter-mile north 'to get away from track to BSD which has now become a main thoroughfare'. The weather turned cold, sometimes wet. Battle dress and woollen underwear were issued—also a fourth blanket. Sports teams and committees began functioning again. Parades and inspections reared their ugly heads.

But soon once more it was 'goodbye to all that'. On 4 December the Division set off west, on a long 'hike' right across **Cyrenaica**. Again our mission was to outflank Rommel, who had halted and dug in at **El Agheila**. Here, as at **Alamein**, the northern end of his defence line abutted the sea; to the south there were marshes and soft sand, around which our Division was to move in a wide encircling movement to contain the enemy while other Eighth Army formations made a frontal attack. This 'left hook' involved a 350-mile approach march across the desert to **El Haseiat**, via **El Adem**, **Bir Hacheim**, and **Msus**. Divisional Petrol and Divisional Supply Companies went on ahead, to make issues to Divisional units as they passed through **El Adem**. Our Company then replenished at **Tobruk** and followed on.

By 9 November the Division had reached its assembly area at **El Haseiat**. From then on it would need to be self-supporting



LEFT HOOK AT EL AGHEILA

LEFT HOOK AT EL AGHEILA

with regard to petrol, water and rations, since, in the next phase of the advance—another 300 miles or so—there would be no supply dumps and little opportunity for replenishment. To meet this situation our two brigades and associated units were to draw sufficient POL to carry them 300 miles, while Petrol Company, besides supplying this vast amount, was also required to reload with stocks of POL sufficient to take the whole Division a further 150 miles.

This was a ‘tall order’ and well beyond the scope of our one Company, even with its 4 and **6 RMT** attachments. So Colonel Crump arranged for 100 3-ton lorries (fifty from each New Zealand infantry brigade) to pick up 60,000 gallons of POL from 106 FMC at **Agedabia** and dump it in the Petrol Company area. The complete petrol plan—on which the success of the left hook depended—was thus outlined on 9 December:

| | |
|--|-------------|
| Issues by Petrol Company on 9 December | 45,000 gals |
| No. 2 Platoon dump in area 10 December | 20,000 gals |
| 100 brigade trucks in area 10 December | 60,000 gals |
| Company holding, in four platoons | 80,000 gals |

Total

205,000 gals

On 10 December, with Divisional units fully alive to their instructions regarding POL, large concentrations of vehicles had collected in the replenishment area. The congestion was accentuated by the continual arrival of loaded convoys. The first batch of seventeen 3-ton lorries (10,000 gals) was disposed of within ten minutes, the second group equally quickly. By 3.30 p.m. 32,000 gallons had been issued and 19,480 gallons dumped in the Company area. At 4 p.m. Captain **Blanch¹⁵ brought forty 3-ton lorries with 25,600 gallons, and by 5 p.m. this, too, had been disposed of. An hour later a review of the POL situation showed total issues for the day at 76,938 gallons, with known requirements still to be satisfied at approximately 5000 gallons. The required amount was supplied next day; and our Company, with its four platoons fully loaded, as instructed, moved south with the Division on the next stage of its journey.**

This move took the New Zealanders 30 miles. Then, on 13 December, led by 4 Light Armoured Brigade, which came under command of the Division in the assembly area, they swung south-west to Chrystal's Rift. The famous 'left hook' to outflank Rommel at **El Agheila, the strongest defence position in **Libya**, and the high-water mark of the Desert Army's two previous advances there, had now begun. The route, through soft sands and salt marshes, treacherous for wheeled traffic, had been 'recced' by the Long Range Desert Group and a British armoured-car patrol. Secrecy was the keynote of operations now, and a strict radio silence was imposed.**

On 13 December the Division crossed Chrystal's Rift and next day struck north-west, its thrust-line marked as usual by our **Divisional Provost Company with the familiar black-diamond signs. As the last units passed them by, the signs were lifted and replaced by petrol tins bearing the Division's fernleaf emblem. The going had been tough for most of the way, particularly when approaching Chrystal's Rift, named after the British armoured-car officer who had discovered it. This feature was a wadi, six miles broad, with precipitous sides. Bulldozers had been**

used to cut a narrow track, through which our tanks and vehicles, now numbering 3000, funnelled in three long columns. Once across they fanned out again into desert formation.

For the night move of 14-15 December, which took us across the **Marada** track, running south from **El Agheila**, the Division with its supporting armour again closed in to the familiar three-lane 'column of route'. All, that is, except Divisional Ammunition Company. Preserving a rugged individuality, and travelling immediately ahead of Divisional Petrol Company, they adopted a seven-lane formation, which, according to Petrol Company's war diary, 'proved difficult from the start, as the centre lanes were much shorter than the two outsides, and therefore to keep contact with their rear vehicles in the darkness it was necessary to run practically into the middle of Div Amn'. The plaint continues:

This led to a certain amount of confusion when narrow defiles had to be passed through and the convoy closed in, as the last few trucks of the outside lanes of Amn Coy found themselves in with Pet Coy and tried to race through. However, topographical conditions eventually forced the convoy into column of route, and once this formation was adopted the going became faster and more orderly. Halt made at 2010 hrs, and again Div Amn took up their seven-lane formation. This time the result was even more chaotic than previously. A lot of soft ground had to be traversed and many trucks became bogged.

As trucks behind realised that the convoy had not stopped there was a general scrambling past on each side of the fallen vehicle until the convoy was packed into a solid mass with a spirit in the air of every man for himself. Atop a rise the convoy was passing adjacent to a fiercely blazing truck (later found to be a No 2 Platoon load-carrier which had caught fire with its petrol load aboard earlier in the evening). And here, with the whole convoy of trucks side by side and nose to tail, a halt was made for no apparent reason for more than fifteen minutes. Whoever was responsible for stopping a solidly-packed convoy of supplies so precious to the Division beside a beacon which could be seen for miles

could not be too severely dealt with.

Fortunately, the *Luftwaffe* was having a night off. Our Company bedded down at 10.35 p.m., resuming its march next morning. At 3 p.m. the Administration Group, now under command of Major **Ian Stock**,¹⁶ received notice of enemy troops on the northern flank of the Divisional axis, so the Group moved south, then west, the head of its column drawing level with 5 Brigade (which was to give it protection) two hours later. After a brief halt vehicles were closed up, and another night move commenced—north-west for 25 miles, back on to the Divisional axis. Petrol Company, with the rest of the group, dispersed their vehicles, with pickets posted, since there was some uncertainty about our exact position and that of the enemy. At 9 p.m. hostile tanks were reported in the neighbourhood, so Admin Group was ordered to move again, ten miles back along the axis track. There the convoy dispersed and bedded down—only to be roused out again at 3.45 a.m. and told to pack and be ready to move at dawn.

While the Admin Group was thus ‘kafoofling’ around, the Division's fighting troops, having completed their long circuit to get in behind the enemy, were preparing to cut his escape-route. For, under strong British pressure from the east, Rommel had already begun to abandon the **El Agheila** positions and was again intent on heading west. His rearguard, as usual, was the formidable *Africa Corps*. So, after nightfall, Freyberg ordered 6 Brigade to move north, cut the road, and thus ‘box’ the enemy's remaining forces. But stern opposition from elements of *go Light Division*, and the difficulty of taking up positions in strange country in the dark, thwarted this move.

Fifth Brigade's role was to follow 6 Brigade and take up positions on its flank. But difficulties of terrain, and the nearness of our Admin Group with its mass of soft-skinned vehicles needing protection, caused **Freyberg** to halt 5 Brigade some distance short of 6 Brigade, leaving a wide gap. In his desperate plight the enemy was quick to take advantage. Next morning *15 Panzer Division*, which had spent the night only a few miles east of **2 NZ Division**, raced through the gap and escaped to

Nofilia. During the night, while *go Light Division* was fending off our 6 Brigade, *21 Panzer Division* had also escaped, along the main road. So run the fortunes of war. But this experience was a galling one for our Division, which had come within an ace of ‘bagging’ the much-vaunted *Africa Corps*.

On 17 December the New Zealand Division essayed a further small ‘left hook’ around the enemy positions at **Nofilia**. Fifth Brigade made a spirited effort to get astride the road, but soft sand and a determined German flank guard prevented them. Again the enemy—highly sensitive to these outflanking movements—slipped away, to defensive positions he was preparing near **Buerat**. He left *15 Panzer* as a covering force at **Sirte**. Our light armoured forces still harassed him, but Eighth Army had now reached its limit for any large-scale advance because of administrative problems. **Nofilia** was 260 miles from **Benghazi** (our advanced supply base) while **Sirte** was another 80 miles farther on. It would take at least a fortnight to get enough supplies, especially of petrol, for a non-stop advance on **Tripoli**, the next sizeable port.

So our Division settled down in the **Nofilia** area, to celebrate another Christmas (desert fashion) and build up reserves for the next big push. That we *were* going on to **Tripoli** (the dream and Mecca of all **Western Desert** campaigners) the Army Commander had told us. And while no one now doubted Eighth Army's fiery commander, what worried us was who would get there first. Already the LRDG, under Eighth Army command, was reconnoitring the unknown country ahead, seeking routes and landing grounds. And, as time went on and preparations developed for the **Buerat** encounter, our keenness to gain the coveted honour of being the first Allied troops in **Tripoli** increased.

December the 24th dawned dour and windy. Petrol Company's war diary notes: ‘there was little in the way of alcoholic stimulants to enliven the proceedings, and the only occurrence which made this Christmas Eve any different from other days was a heavy influx of Christmas parcels which Dvr **Anderson**,¹⁷ our postal clerk, had a busy

time distributing. If only the people at home could see the eagerness with which their parcels are greeted here it would do their hearts good.'

Christmas Day was declared a holiday for all, after a church parade at 10.30 a.m. at which the Colonel was present. Padre **Holland** conducted the service. Following that, Colonel Crump gave an address in which he (on behalf of the GOC and himself) thanked the Company for the work it had done, stating that the NZASC had created a record unexampled in this, the last, or any previous war. He gave a résumé of Petrol Company's work since **Crete**, and forecast an expansion of the Company in the near future. He gave a hint as to our future operations, stressing the vital importance of petrol. He also pointed out that though the Division had just covered between 600-700 miles, the Petrol Company platoons had travelled over 1400 miles in their successful efforts to keep it supplied with POL. Much of our success was due to the mechanical maintenance of the vehicles, and this, he predicted, would probably prove of even greater importance before the campaign was finished.

The cooks did great work in all platoons and prepared dinners well worthy of Christmas Day. Pork was on the menu, and even Christmas puddings, these including a good dash of rum among the ingredients. Major Forbes visited all messes and sampled the cooking, completing his tour at Company Headquarters, where he joined Headquarters' officers and sergeants in their worthy efforts to act as waiters at the men's mess. All ranks throughout the Company were loud in their praise of the cooking, which certainly was a fine performance in view of the difficult conditions under which the cooks had to work. The afternoon was spent in sleeping off the effects of over-eating. One bottle of beer per man was the total issue of alcohol, so there was no insobriety in the camp. The cooks rounded off the day by turning on a good tea, which included a fruit salad. The officers and sergeants had their Christmas dinner in the evening.

When 1943 came in, Petrol Company was still 'on the beach' at **Nofilia**, 1200 miles from the **Suez Canal**. Hardy types took their first dips

in Tripolitanian waters; others boiled up sea-water in petrol tins to wash shirts, socks and grubby bodies. For work there was vehicle maintenance and overhaul, plus a daily drag to and from the FMC, laying up petrol for another 350 miles. Sport got going again, the big event for Petrol Company being its rugby contest with 28 (Maori) Battalion on 31 December. This was played on 28 Battalion's 'home ground' 30 miles away, since our team had had no time to construct a field, or even to have a practice game. Nevertheless, by half-time we had a 5-3 lead on the Maoris. A penalty in the last fifteen minutes put them one point ahead, and so the game ended after a valiant tussle. Petrol Company's points came from a try by Sergeant Faulkner, converted by Corporal Haworth,¹⁸ in the first fifteen minutes of play. Both of 28 Battalion's scoring efforts were the result of penalties.

¹ General Sir Alan Brooke, later Field-Marshal Lord Alanbrooke.

² *The Memoirs of Field-Marshal Montgomery*, pp. 101-2.

³ According to some. According to others, this 'show' was a TABU. For explanation of the term, ask any soldier.

⁴ S-Sgt H. B. C. Parkin; Christchurch; born NZ 2 Apr 1905; clerk.

⁵ L-Cpl R. D. Janes; Lower Hutt; born Wellington, 24 Feb 1914; monotype operator.

⁶ Lt-Col J. Pool, m.i.d.; Te Kopuru, North Auckland; born England, 12 Jun 1904; credit manager; LO with SHAEF in Europe 1944-45; LO with British Army staff, Paris, 1945-46.

⁷ Lt J. H. Rich; Darfield; born Christchurch, 4 Aug 1916; sawmill hand; wounded 21 May 1941.

⁸ Capt F. G. Butt, m.i.d.; Seddon; born Blenheim, 8 Dec 1913;

farmer.

⁹ Actually 2140 hrs, 9.40 p.m.

¹⁰ On 27 October Petrol Company sustained its first casualty in this campaign, Lance-Corporal L. Blucher, of Workshops Platoon, being wounded while carrying out salvage operations in a minefield.

¹¹ Despite the GOC's enthusiasm, there were some hitches. For example, one of the British infantry brigades did not take its final objective, and the armour did not debouch into the open. Nevertheless, SUPERCHARGE 'turned the trick'.

¹² Sgt W. M. Faulkner; born NZ 2 Feb 1918; shorthand typist.

¹³ Dvr B. Streeter; Christchurch; born NZ 2 Jan 1907; labourer.

¹⁴ Lt-Col A. E. Hillier, OBE; AA & QMG 2 NZ Div Jun-Nov 1942; ex British Army.

¹⁵ Capt W. R. Blanch; Palmerston North; born Edinburgh, 18 Mar 1909; insurance clerk; wounded Jun 1942.

¹⁶ Maj I. E. Stock, MBE, ED, m.i.d.; Christchurch; born Christchurch, 24 May 1914; clerk; OC Sup Coln Nov 1940-Mar 1941; OC 4 Res MT Coy Jun 1941-Sep 1943; OC NZ Admin Gp Oct 1942-Sep 1943; OC NZ VRD, Bari, Sep-Dec 1943.

¹⁷ Cpl G. H. Anderson; Dunedin; born Christchurch, 20 May 1915; car painter.

¹⁸ Cpl L. R. Haworth; Cambridge; born Cambridge, 12 Sep 1917; grocer's assistant.

PETROL COMPANY

CHAPTER 14 – THE END IN NORTH AFRICA

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The End in North Africa

EXACTLY three months after the opening barrage had boomed out at **El Alamein**, troops of Eighth Army entered **Tripoli**, thus completing the write-off of **Italy's** African Empire. **Tripoli** was the goal which the Desert Army had set itself when it first crossed the Wire into **Libya** on the morning of 10 June 1940. Its attainment now, with the Russians pulverising encircled German armies at **Stalingrad**, Japanese ships routed at **Rabaul**, and Eisenhower's **First Army** moving up on **Tunisia**, bore immense propaganda value. No less important was its practical effect of spiking the enemy's short North African supply line (via **Italy** and the Sicilian narrows) and gaining for Eighth Army a large port with neighbouring air fields to help in hammering the retreating foe.

Rommel's position at **Buerat** (where he stood at the close of 1942) was not specially strong. It could be easily outflanked; and reinforcements which he badly needed were now being sent to **Tunisia** to meet **First Army's** threat from the north and west. So a stiff contest was not expected.

But before we could resume our move against Rommel our own reserves needed building up, particularly in POL. For Montgomery's aim looked beyond **Buerat**, and beyond the **Homs- Tarhuna** line farther back. His plan, when he halted Eighth Army at **Nofilia** in December, was to complete forward dumping by 14 January, then 'leap on the enemy in strength' early next morning. He would then 'crash right through to **Tripoli**' within ten days. Any delay in this programme, he realised, would involve Eighth Army in serious supply difficulties and hold up the advance—perhaps force a retirement

The first fortnight of January, therefore, brought heavy slogging for Petrol Company, and, in fact, for every load carrier the Army could muster. For, on 5 and 6 January, the weather again took a hand in the game, lashing the Mediterranean coast with gales and smashing the

harbour installations at **Benghazi**, our nearest port. Cargo handled there immediately dropped from 3000 tons daily to 1000 tons, dwindling even further in the following week. Supplies had to be hauled overland another 300 miles from **Tobruk**—nearly a thousand miles from **Tripoli**. Here was a ‘Pretty how-de-do!’ Nevertheless the original programme was retained and the supply problem met by grounding the whole of **10 Corps** and using its transport to bring up supplies.

Petrol Company's share in the stocking-up had actually commenced in the previous month, following an administrative instruction of 22 December which required the Division to build up a reserve for 250 miles in its first-line transport. From that date the Company drew from FMCs at **El Agheila** and **Marble Arch** the Division's daily ration of 25,000 gallons—enough for a 50-mile reserve. After 25 December, Petrol Company was required to draw 75,000 gallons, in addition to the daily ration; so, by the end of the month, most Divisional units were holding sufficient POL for 350 miles, while Petrol Company also had a goodly stock on wheels.

The battle plan was for **51 (Highland) Division** to advance and if necessary attack in the coastal sector along the main road, while a simultaneous outflanking movement inland—as at **El Agheila**—would be made by **7 Armoured Division** and the New Zealand Division advancing side by side. With the New Zealanders were the **Royal Scots Greys** (manning Sherman tanks) who came under command on 29 December. Clearly, such an ‘outfit’ would be mighty petrol users—and our Administration Group carted POL for both inland divisions.

So, on 2 January, Petrol Company's load-carriers moved out from their seaside home near **Nofilia**, where they had managed to make themselves pretty comfortable, and began building up a large dump near the **Wadi Tamet**. They drew supplies from 110 FMC, then humped them forward for about 75 miles to the edge of the wadi, where New Zealand Engineers, with bull dozers, were busy cutting tracks across. Our drivers camped near the dumping area, shuttling between it and the FMC on good going across hard flat desert. With them worked attachments from

4 and 6 NZ Reserve MT Companies and 527 Company, RASC.

Cold winds which whipped up sandstorms, or brought low cloud, made conditions extremely disagreeable. Visibility was reduced to a mile or less; and sometimes it got so bad that convoys had to travel long distances by dead reckoning, using night formation. Following winds caused engines to overheat, and radiators boiled merrily. Nevertheless, by 10 January, Petrol Company and its attachments had laid down 120,000 gallons of POL, and also had on wheels a further 74,720 gallons of MT petrol, 17,480 gallons of high-octane petrol, 2140 gallons of diesel fuel, and large stocks of lubricating oils and greases. In the same period they delivered 80,000 gallons to **7 Armoured Division.**

Besides this very substantial work programme, the first two weeks of January 1943 were eventful ones for the Company in various ways. First came news of a new establishment, to build up the Company to a Headquarters, Workshops, and five operating platoons, i.e., an increase of three new platoons. These were to be manned by reinforcements expected from New Zealand. Senior NCOs were chosen from the field company; and they, with Captain Washbourn and three other officers (Butt, **Aickin,¹ and **Templeton**² went to **Maadi** to help train and equip the new arrivals. Our officer strength had been stepped up by the following additions: Captain J. K. **Palmer**,³ Lieutenants F. C. Aickin and G. W. Lyon (formerly a corporal with Petrol Company, First Echelon), Second-Lieutenants **Baldwin**,⁴ and J. H. Templeton. On 5 January, Aickin, Lyon and Maurie Browne were promoted captain.**

Two days later Browne and his genial driver, Jack Carthy, with the Senior Supply Officer (Major Bracegirdle), ran over a land mine while crossing a disused airfield in Browne's pick-up. The mine exploded under the right-hand front wheel, effectively 'wiping' the front drive, sump, both wheels, and part of the engine. The occupants had a lucky escape, the only one injured being Carthy, who was blown clean out of the driver's seat and landed very heavily on his own. He fractured a bone at the base of the spine. Browne tells of his reactions to this incident in a

letter home: 'I had to laugh. Bill Bracegirdle, who is one of the best blokes in the world, and a real wit, was sitting in the middle. And when the blast, smoke and dust had cleared away he came to light in his inimitable drawl with "Hell, I've been blown up by a bloody mine". Well, I got the giggles, I'm afraid, and I'm sure Jack thinks I'm quite mad as I was inquiring after his health and he was pretty badly shocked, and covered in black powder, wanted to be sick etc., and all I could do was giggle at him while fixing him up.'

Next day (8 January) fire broke out in a No. 1 Platoon vehicle loaded with petrol. Good work with sand and the extinguishers saved the vehicle and its load, damage being confined to a burnt canopy and blistered paintwork. This fire was no sooner dealt with than another broke out in an attached vehicle of 4 RMT Company. Here again a good save was made, with the loss of only 240 gallons of petrol from a load of 640 gallons. Ken Drummond,⁵ (corporal fitter) played a prominent part in the salvage operations; and as he had also distinguished himself during the troublesome time of the November floods by continually using his great strength and skill to extricate bogged vehicles, he was later awarded the BEM and given a field commission, one of the very few in 2 NZEF.

Petrol Company's truck troubles were not yet over. On 9 January Staff-Sergeant Dennison⁶ reported a fire on his 15-cwt which destroyed the load, including new tyres, but the truck was saved. That same day a Company Headquarters 15-cwt, driven by Driver Coburn,⁷ tried conclusions with a tank transporter—complete with Sherman tank! Coburn's truck was bunted off the road, its tray pushed askew. But it was still 'driveable'; so Coburn, his vehicle now moving crab-wise, carried on to 6 Field Ambulance where he had been taking Corporal Hobbs,⁸ whose face was badly burnt in the No. 1 Platoon truck-fire the previous evening.

By 10 January our Division had reached the Wadi Tamet, and was 'rarin' to go'. But the last 't' still had to be crossed and the last 'i' dotted in a complex and—we hoped—foolproof supply plan which would carry us right on to Tripoli. Next day units drew from the Wadi Tamet dump

54,272 gallons of MT petrol, 5932 gallons of HOP and 378 gallons of AGO (diesel). All were now stocked up to full capacity, holding POL for at least 350 miles. Rations and water (with the daily water issue fixed at half a gallon per man) were also laid in. Plans were made for the 'leap-frogging' of petrol and supply dumps to allow for replenishment during the first stages of the move.

So, on 12 January, with a nagging wind raising clouds of dust, the Division crawled and jolted along the four tracks across the **Wadi Tamet** as a prelude to yet another out flanking programme. Supply, Petrol and Ammunition Companies, in one of the two newly-formed Administration Groups, tagged along behind 5 Brigade, the rearmost fighting formation of the Division. 'It was', says Jim Henderson, in *RMT*, 'just about a Cook's Tour, that eleven-day, 250-mile trip which began on 12 January and landed the Division in **Tripoli** on the 23rd. Drivers, expecting constant challenge from the **Luftwaffe**, disappeared beneath camouflage nets at bivouac areas, energetically dug slitties while anti-aircraft units kept constantly on the alert, remained well spaced, dodged dusty and well-worn tracks where possible, and at every halt turned vehicles north to reduce reflection from windscreens. But dun coloured fighters of the **Desert Air Force** gave enemy dive bombers few good opportunities.'

Maurie Browne, as Divisional Petrol Officer, tells rather a different story. 'The going', he says, 'was terrible. The roughest desert I've ever seen. Over the first stage it was beautiful flat going for 70-odd miles then we struck the **Wadi Tamet** and had to plug through the soft stuff for 40-odd miles, then on through Wadi Zem-Zem. Again bloody awful country with huge rocks strewn through the soft stuff. All the time we were on our usual stunt of refilling by going back, not to an FMC this time, but to our own dumps which we had established well forward into enemy territory. I had a pretty hectic time as I had to keep tag on our own dumps and control our issues etc. The areas were strewn with mines and quite often I had to push on to catch up with the Div in the night.

'All the country was new to us and travelling at night by oneself over

a track made by the Division wheelmarks was a bit trying. One one occasion I missed the turn-off where our people had gone and ended up at the head of one of our Armoured Divs. I was not the only one who did this, though, as one complete formation of our show missed the way and got lost for a whole day. This particular night the going was the roughest I've ever struck and the old bus made heavy weather of it. At times she was standing on her nose. I eventually found the Show in the morning and by this time I had a gang of lost vehicles tailing me up. I can tell you I was properly worn out.'

By 14 January the Division had drawn close to Rommel's southern flank. Things were now beginning to warm up. Gunfire and the rumble of bombs could be heard, from the north-west. Flares appeared. Next day our forward columns ran into some shelling. But the enemy did not hold out at **Buerat**. With exasperating coolness he fell back step by step in a 'textbook' withdrawal, his rearguards challenging our probing armour right up to the last moment while his main force slipped away. At one stage, in the coastal sector, he showed some stubbornness which threatened to upset Eighth Army's schedule; but the Highland Division stepped up the heat, and Rommel got on his way again. At 5 a.m. on 23 January, patrols of the 11 th Hussars entered **Tripoli**, followed an hour later by troops of the Highland Division. First New Zealand unit to enter the city was the **Maori Battalion**, that afternoon. Thus in eighty days our Division had traversed 1400 miles of desert from **El Alamein**.

Petrol Company Headquarters and Workshops settled down for a few days near **Azizia**; operating platoons and attachments had been sent to 112 FMC, **Misurata**, where they camped while awaiting the arrival of petrol. The HQ area was sandy but cultivated, with grass and trees providing a most welcome change. Better still, there was now an abundant water-supply; so, on 26 January, a bright warm day, the Company area resembled something between a Chinese laundry and a Turkish bathhouse, as clothes were washed and hung out to dry, and bodies in various stages of nudity dashed about heating up tins of water for a good old clean-up. The following day dawned bleak and wet, with

intermittent heavy rain which turned the sandy area to mud. The Company's detached platoons began to arrive in, loaded variously with rations, petrol and reinforcements. General carrying from railhead at **Misurata** to 113 FMC and various unit areas then followed.

By Saturday, 30 January, the weather had picked up again; and forty-seven men from Petrol Company set out in crisp, spring sunshine for their first day-leave to **Tripoli**. While this was for most an exhilarating experience, others found it dis appointing. One wrote:

I have been into **Tripoli** and was not very impressed. Actually, though, it was in better condition than I expected. Some of the boys expected it to be another Alex or **Cairo**, but I'm afraid they didn't realize that the Hun had been running the show for nearly three years. He had not left much food behind, and the locals all looked half starved. I hate to think what the occupied countries are like when he treats his allies like this. The RAF had certainly made a mess of the port, and I don't think it could have been much use to the Hun for the past few months. The civilians are starting to appear again now that they find we are not the ogres that the Hun had led them to believe we are. There is absolutely nothing to buy in the town and I don't think I'll trouble about going in again for some time.

Routine orders duly warned against the hazards of the city, the diseased condition of the 'ladies', and so forth. And while the New Zealand soldier was no more virtuous (or less adventur ous) than the next man, most found the fascination of **Tripoli** lay in the colourful sights and sounds of its people, with their speech, dress, customs and so on, all so very different from our own. The mere sight of streets and buildings, of homes, trees, gardens, children, was a joy after months in the bare and monotonous desert. Then there was our interest in 'plonk', also the subject of dire official warnings which did not deter our lads from seeking out and destroying (to wit, by swallowing) large quantities of the local wine. Some took pleasure in acquiring knick-knacks—by more or less honest trade or barter—for making army life more tolerable. So mirrors, radios, pictures, even armchairs, began to appear in tents

and dugouts. For some the flashing of thick wads of lire, now the official currency, but worth little enough, was a satisfaction in itself. By assiduous hunting, especially in the Jewish quarter, the odd souvenir could be found for sending home.

At 1 p.m. on the last day of January, Petrol Company received orders to move, at 2.30 p.m., to a new area near **Castel Benito**. Major Forbes was away at the time with the operating platoons; and since a number of men were also absent on leave and on duty, this move promised to be difficult. However, there were willing volunteers for the packing of absentees' gear and as deputy drivers for trucks, so the job got under way. Captain Trewby and CSM **Gay**⁹ went on ahead to 'recce' the new area, and sharp at half past two Sergeant **Hainsworth**,¹⁰ of Headquarters Platoon, led off the convoy, consisting of Company Headquarters, Workshops, RMT vehicles and attached RASC. No. 2 Platoon arrived shortly before the Company moved out, but Lieutenant Burkitt elected to retain his platoon in the old area until next day.

The movement ended in a mile drive up a narrow, tree-lined track, to the left of which Company Headquarters set up shop in the pleasantest spot it had yet found in North Africa—a flat, grassy patch lined with bluegums, and providing vistas of groves and wild flowers. Adjoining it was a broad field to be used on the following Thursday (4 February) for the highlight and climax of the Division's ceremonial career—a review by **Britain's** illustrious Prime Minister; with him were the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Generals Alexander and Montgomery, and other foremost architects of our victories in North **Africa**. It was thought when Petrol Company settled in, that part of their new area might be needed as a gun and tank park for that occasion, so Workshops and the platoons were warned not to dig in or make a settled camp in the meantime. And so January ended with the Company installed amid very congenial surroundings. Petrol issues for the month reached the phenomenal total of 291,436 gallons, plus 5227 gallons of oils, 3715 of AGO, 1528 of MBO and 1190 lb of grease.

Petrol Company settled down at [Castel Benito](#) to routine carrying duties and practice for the 'big show' on 4 February. That day dawned clear and sunny, with light fleecy clouds. Troops and transport began arriving early in our area for a morning rehearsal at 10.30. The Company was represented by 8 officers and 180 other ranks in an Army Service group on the left flank, with 6 Brigade as centre group, and 5 Brigade, the [Royal Scots Greys](#) and our [Divisional Cavalry](#) on the right flank. A dais overlooked the centre of the parade ground.

Rehearsal concluded at noon, when the men dismissed for lunch. The parade began to march on at 1.30 p.m. and all were in position by two o'clock. Then came the 'general salute' for the arrival of Mr Churchill, who rode in an open car and wore [Royal Air Force](#) uniform. With him rode the now familiar figure of General Montgomery, complete with double badged black beret. Behind, in a German staff car, came the Chief of the Imperial General Staff (General Sir Alan Brooke) and the C-in-C Middle East Forces (General Sir Harold Alexander). Lieutenant-General Sir Oliver Leese (GOC 30 Corps) and other high-ranking officers followed.

Mr Churchill inspected the parade, driving down the lines of troops. He then mounted the dais and addressed them, speaking of the valour of the New Zealand Division, the gratitude and pride of the people of Great Britain and New Zealand. He told them they would 'march into fairer lands', but quickly dispelled any hope that this meant 'home' by announcing that the [New Zealand Government](#), in secret session, had agreed to the Division's seeing the job through in North Africa. This speech—a brilliant and inspiring one—was followed by three cheers for the Prime Minister, the last cheer being preceded, rather disconcertingly, by the sudden firing of anti-aircraft guns, whose crews, protecting such distinguished company, kept a wary eye for 'gate-crashers'. To martial music from a large pipe-band of the Highland Division, the troops then marched past, twelve abreast, while Churchill took the salute.

Throughout February, Petrol Company worked hard on various 'cartage contracts' shifting mail, salvage, POL, cargo from the docks, rations, jerricans, 44-gallon drums, and so forth. Attached platoons from 4 and 6 Reserve MT Companies, and those from the RASC, returned to their own units. They were replaced, on 8 February, by sixty three-tonners from Divisional Artillery's first-line transport, and one platoon from Supply Company. These and our own load-carriers toiled incessantly at stocking up dumps and FMCs, ready for the next big show—the assault on the **Mareth** line. Elements of Eighth Army were already rounding up Rommel's forces west of **Tripoli** and pushing them back behind the main **Mareth** positions, so that we could 'recce' them and gain control of important road centres such as **Ben Gardane**, **Foum Tatahouine** and **Medenine**, also the vital airfields around **Medenine**.

A tough battle was expected at **Mareth**. This was a kind of African 'Maginot Line' which the French had built to protect their Tunisian frontier against Italian encroachments from **Tripolitania**. The line was very short—only about 22 miles—with the sea on one flank and the steep **Matmata** Mountains on its inland or western end. Thus an outflanking movement would be very difficult. Eighth Army, nevertheless, intended to carry one out, with the New Zealanders again detailed to make the 'left hook', while other formations attacked along the coast. But first we needed to get the port of **Tripoli** 'uncorked' and ships unloading there to build up the necessary supplies. This would do away with the **Benghazi- Tobruk** road lift and make **10 Corps** mobile again.

In their off-duty hours at **Castel Benito**, Petrol Company, helped and inspired by that cheerful mass of energy, Padre **Holland**, who had joined the Company there, built huge dugouts as recreation-room/canteens, the platoons vieing with each other to produce the 'best and biggest'. As each was completed it was given an official opening attended by Major Forbes, Colonel Crump and other NZASC officers, and duly celebrated with wine and song. The latter was provided partly by members of the **Kiwi Concert Party** which had arrived at **Tripoli** on 8 February, and

partly by the Company's own 'home-grown' talent, all receiving vociferous applause. These recreation rooms soon became a feature of Petrol Company's 'night life' at **Castel Benito** and were used for lectures, debates, and card tournaments. Many drivers also made themselves roomy dens, dugouts five or six feet deep, over which they stretched tarpaulins or bivvy tents. Most were light-proofed (for the *Luftwaffe* gave us no respite at **Tripoli**), enabling the owner to 'stay at home' in the evenings and read or write, with the aid of leads from nearby truck batteries, or other forms of illumination.

Workshops Platoon, not to be outdone, had 'found' a large wooden building which they dismantled and carted in sections to their area. 'It is as big as the Scout Hall in Karori and it makes all the difference for the boys at night', wrote Captain Browne. 'We had an "opening" a few nights ago, when the lads put on their own items, songs, mouth-organ solos, etc. The Colonel was invited and enjoyed himself immensely. The show started with a Church Service and then the concert side. There was to be a small amount of plonk (Itie wine) but somehow the lads jacked up their own supplies and by 10.30 the show was a real "whoop". Nobody was objectionably tight but all were very happy including Col Crump. He didn't seem to want to go home and it was well on towards midnight when the show broke up.'

There was time, too, for games. A Divisional sports meeting was scheduled for 13 February, and after try-outs and practices the following were selected to represent Petrol Company: Drivers E. R. Sisson, D. C. W. Meurk, E. Barabithe and Johnson. Owing to the urgent work then engaging the Division, however, this fixture was cancelled. On 14 February the **Maori Battalion** won the Divisional rugby championship, defeating **Divisional Signals** 8-6 in the final. Petrol Company had 'ringside seats' at this exciting match, as it was played on the same broad grassy field adjoining their area where the parade for Mr Churchill had been held. The narrowness of the victory was rather galling for the Company in view of the bare one-point edge the Maoris had had on us in the semi finals; but all agreed that they played a great game and well

deserved their win.

By 16 February our trucks were working 180 miles west of **Tripoli**, across the Tunisian border, carting petrol and am munition to 115 FMC at **Ben Gardane**. Drivers reported that beyond the frontier the country gradually reverted to desert. On the 18th a No. 2 Platoon convoy, returning empty from **Ben Gardane**, had stopped to brew up at 6 p.m. while a sand storm was blowing. A Kittyhawk pilot, with his visibility reduced to zero by the storm, spotted the campfires and essayed a forced landing alongside. He touched down well, then struck a rough patch which tore off a landing wheel, causing some damage to the fuselage. But the pilot, a Canadian, stepped out unharmed and joined our drivers for tea.

A few days later all ASC trucks on detail or detachment were recalled to their units; Supply Company and Divisional Artillery vehicles 'went home'. Our spell at **Tripoli** was drawing to a close. The New Zealand Division was called on, hastily, to strengthen the Eighth Army line at **Medenine**, where an enemy attack was expected. For Rommel, now becoming 'caged' by Allied armies closing in from both sides, was striving desperately to make a kill.

Bombs were falling on **Tripoli** as Petrol Company passed through it on the night of 2-3 March, on the first stage of their journey into 'fairer lands'. Searchlights raked the sky; and criss-crossing streams of red and green tracer, splashed with 'flaming onions' and exploding shells from the heavy AA barrage around the city, treated our drivers to a vivid pyro technic display. Major Forbes as convoy commander led the column, comprising Petrol Company, Divisional Ammunition, Divisional Supply, Water Section, and 4 and 6 Reserve MT Companies in that order. Bren carriers were seen, as we left our area, being loaded on to Scammels. The road was tarsealed and in good order. No lights were allowed until after **Tripoli**, when dimmed ones were permitted; but these were of little use in the pitch-black night, except for avoiding the vehicle immediately ahead. Missing the freedom—as well as the bumps—of the open desert, drivers strained to keep sight of the guiding road-verges. Beyond these

were mines, banks, ditches and other traps for the unwary.

At Zuara, with 70 miles covered, a halt was made at 11.45 p.m. Most trucks had kept position, the few exceptions being vehicles in poor mechanical condition recently taken on loan from NZ Ordnance Field Park. They were coaxed along by our Workshops Recovery Section. Farther back, a truck from I Platoon had run off the road and attempted to get down a well, fortunately without success. It, also, was recalled to duty by Workshops Recovery Section. At midnight we got going again. The roads were now rough, sometimes steeply banked, or flanked by marshy ground. There were more vehicle casualties as tired drivers failed to take bends in the dark and ran over the edge. It was a busy night for the Recovery Section. At 2.45 a.m. the convoy halted again, at Pisida, with 100 miles covered; then on again at 3 a.m.

At this stage we were held up by a convoy of tank transporters halted along the roadway for more than a mile, some on the left-hand side, others on the right, the majority square in the middle. The drivers were asleep. Forbes sent a jeep to the head of the concourse (larger vehicles could not get through) to find out the reason for the hold-up. He was informed that the transporters had parked for the night. Since it was imperative for our convoy to get through, the OC himself travelled down the column, waking all drivers and making them move their transporters off the road. At daybreak we entered **Ben Gardane**, a desultory clutter of white stucco buildings, then carried on, over very bad roads, for another eight miles before halting for breakfast. We were now back again in desert country, flat and uninteresting, with no trees. So much, we thought glumly, for Churchill's 'fairer lands'. To make matters worse, Company Headquarters' cookhouses were missing. Primuses promptly went into action.

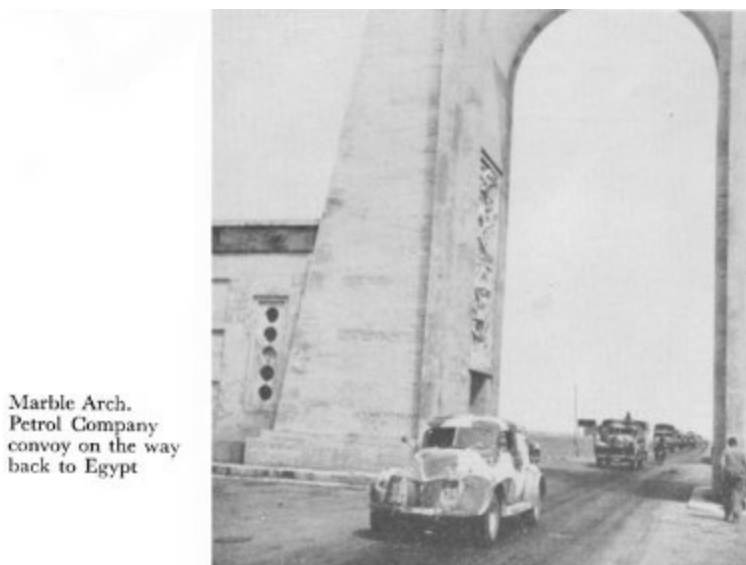
CSM Gay, who had gone on ahead to reconnoitre the new area, eventually turned up and advised that our camp would be six miles farther west, at Kilo 50. Divisional Ammunition Company would camp at Kilo 49, Supply Company at Kilo 51. This information was passed on,

and Petrol Company moved out at 10 a.m., making slow progress along a road now congested with military traffic. We reached our location, south of the main road, at eleven, and platoons took up positions to the rear of Company Headquarters. Everyone was tired, and apart from the essentials little work was done that afternoon. The



'500'. A game under the olive trees in Tunisia

'500'. A game under the olive trees in Tunisia



Marble Arch.
Petrol Company
convoy on the way
back to Egypt

Marble Arch. Petrol Company convoy on the way back to Egypt



'Jerricans by the acre'—a petrol dump in Southern Italy,
November 1943

'Jerricans by the acre'—a petrol dump in Southern Italy, November 1943

'Railway lines were the only good standing we could get, but having to
share them with trains made life a bit awkward at times.' 17 Section at
Archi, November 1943



**'Railway lines were the only good standing we could get, but having
to share them with trains made life a bit awkward at times.' 17 Section
at [Archi](#), November 1943**

Montefalcone. A typical route through a small country village



Montefalcone. A typical route through a small country village

A bridge near Gissi, demolished by the retreating enemy, and alongside it the deviation made by the New Zealand Engineers



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Trucks wait to cross the low-level Bailey bridge over the Sangro,
December 1943

Trucks wait to cross the low-level Bailey bridge over the Sangro, December 1943



Bert Davis and Dick Davies,
I Platoon, in the Atessa area

Bert Davis and Dick Davies, I Platoon, in the Atessa area

After a heavy snowfall in the Sangro area, January 1944



After a heavy snowfall in the Sangro area, January 1944

Company remained on one hour's notice to move, so neither unloading nor digging in was considered worth while. Both HQ cookhouses were still missing. Reports indicated that the officers-sergeants cookhouse had gone over a bank but was now on the way again; the men's cookhouse, also down a bank, had overturned.

Trouble enough—but that wasn't all! The Company's ration truck had not reported in. During the night it ran into the back of a 15-cwt and crashed its radiator. It was taken on tow by another Petrol Company vehicle. Six of I Platoon's trucks (mostly those on loan from Ordnance) were also missing. During the afternoon the vehicle which had been towing the ration truck reported in, minus its protégé. The ill-starred 'tucker buggy' had been hit, while on tow, by a passing tank transporter, and was now a complete write-off. Fortunately, no one was injured. Workshops sent a breakdown wagon to rescue the damaged vehicle and evacuate it to ACP; a three-tonner also went along to uplift personnel and load. Workshops, too, had its share of casualties that night: one 30-cwt with a chassis cracked through going over the bank, and a water-tanker slightly damaged when the truck in front did some careless backing. By nightfall (3 March) all the missing vehicles had reported in, and a harassed OC—who won't easily forget our entry into **Tunisia**—was able to relax. The Company's war diary notes a 'quiet night, except for the constant rumble of transport heading west along the road'.

By 3 p.m. on 3 March, after a swift and stealthy move from **Tripoli**, all units of 5 and 6 NZ Infantry Brigades were in positions near **Medenine** and ready for action. The enemy, by now considerably reinforced, had been delivering some hard blows against Eisenhower's **First Army**, to the north. Rommel still had in hand a substantial reserve—equal to about two armoured divisions—and it seemed likely that he would use this force in a spoiling action against Eighth Army to foil Montgomery's preparations (which were not yet complete) for an 'all-out' assault on the **Mareth** positions. These were only 20-odd miles from **Medenine**, the logical springboard for any such assault; so our forces mustering there could expect a hot reception.

By 3 March Eighth Army had three divisions forward: 51 Division, with 23 Armoured Brigade under command, north of the road through **Medenine**; 2 NZ Division with 201 Guards Brigade and 4 Light Armoured Brigade under command in the area around the town; south of it was 7 Armoured Division, reinforced by 8 Armoured Brigade and I **Free French Flying Column**. Thus, with anti-tank guns dug in and cunningly sited, we awaited the enemy's assault on **Medenine**, which Rommel hoped would cut our communications with **Tripoli** and encircle the greater part of our forces to the north.

In the few days preceding the battle, Petrol Company, from their camp near **Ben Gardane**, 'topped up' the Division's reserves of POL at a replenishment area about 12 miles east of **Medenine**. Empty trucks refilled at 115 FMC, close to our camp. On 6 March, the day Jerry attacked, a 2 Platoon convoy of thirty 3-ton lorries, under Captain Lyon, took ammunition forward from **Ben Gardane** to **Medenine**. On the previous night the German commander, watching his panzers moving down towards the **Medenine** plain, had remarked that unless they won this battle their last hope in **Africa** was gone. For the 'Desert Fox', now a sick and weary man, realised that at last we had him cornered.

What he did not realise, apparently, was the strength of our positions at **Medenine**. Four times he attacked during that day, and each time he was driven off by our artillery, anti tank guns, and infantry. We scarcely used our tanks at all. Rommel lost fifty-two of his—nearly half the number he committed. We lost none. This was the greatest tank loss, for one day, that the enemy had ever sustained in North Africa. It was also (had he known it) Rommel's last battle there. Within the next fortnight he was recalled to **Germany**, and the Italian General Messe took over his command.

On the day of the battle (6 March) enemy planes 'did over' the NZASC lines. At 5.30 p.m. fifteen Focke-Wulfs suddenly appeared in the Divisional Petrol area and romped around at low level with guns blazing furiously. No. I Platoon, queuing up at their cookhouse, promptly

scattered. Others took cover in dugouts or under trucks—not the best of places, since vehicles seemed to be the main targets. A loaded I Platoon truck burst into flames, and a dumped load in 2 Platoon's area was also hit and set on fire. While sand was being thrown on these, the burning truckload, of MT petrol in 44-gallon drums, suddenly exploded.

By a miracle no one was injured in the Petrol Company area, but there were many narrow escapes. One Tommy attached had his cheek grazed by a bullet. A No. I Platoon driver, crouched under the back of his loaded truck, saw the tail-light shot away, while bullets riddled his tyres, canopy and radiator. One shell pierced a drum of oil on the tray, but none of the petrol there was hit. Our vehicle casualties totalled one truck completely U/S, ¹¹ two others damaged but repairable. Petrol losses were fifteen 44-gallon drums of MT and one dump of 680 gallons. Both fires were put out before dark—just as well, since enemy bombers 'boomed around' through out most of the night.

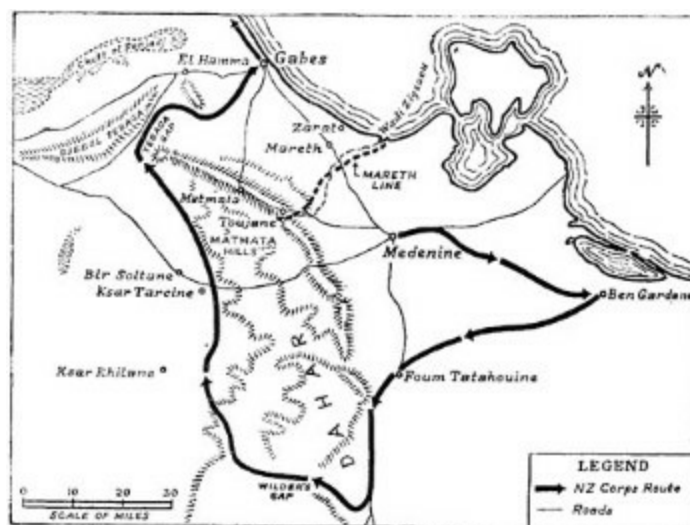
This was Jerry's final attempt to rout Eighth Army and it had failed. He withdrew into the fastness of the **Mareth** positions, leaving us free to continue preparations for forcing him out. Just as Rommel's assault and defeat at **Alam Halfa** had played into our hands before the Battle of **El Alamein**, so did the **Medenine** battle serve our ends before **Mareth**, and for similar reasons. The two engagements (of **Alam Halfa** and **Medenine**) bore some striking similarities. And they demonstrated clearly Montgomery's ability to outwit and out-general the much-vaunted 'Desert Fox'.

The big job now was to smoke him from his lair. To help achieve this, a new formation—the **New Zealand Corps**—was created, with our GOC as Corps Commander. This Corps had a strength of 27,000 men (14,500 of them New Zealanders) and 200 tanks. It comprised **2 NZ Division**, which **Freyberg** still commanded, 8 (British) Armoured Brigade, I Battalion Buffs, King's Dragoon Guards, British medium, field and anti-tank artillery regiments, and the Free French (from Chad) under General Leclerc. Its task was to move swiftly and stealthily round the western flank of the **Mareth** positions and break in through the narrow **Tebaga**

Gap in the Matmata Mountains.

This would place the **New Zealand Corps** in the rear of the enemy at **Mareth**, and so block his escape-route. At the same time, **30 Corps**, with three divisions, would attack on the eastern flank, maintaining a relentless pressure designed to bring the enemy reserves into this part of the defence line. Tenth Corps, with two armoured divisions (1st and 7th), was to be held in reserve, ready to exploit success.

A New Zealand Field Maintenance Centre was established, with Major I. E. Stock as OC, to service the New Zealand



LEFT HOOK AT MARETH

LEFT HOOK AT MARETH

Corps. This was another new departure, and a heavy undertaking for NZASC, which was geared for the supply of one division, only. With the aid of some Indian labour and British army troop companies, the FMC was built up, convoy by convoy and truckload by truckload, right under the noses of the enemy, at **Bir Amir**, about 30 miles south of Foum Tatahouine. Approaches to the FMC area were actually under enemy observation from mountain outposts of his **Mareth**

defences, so no British traffic was allowed on the approach road (a dried-up riverbed) during the hours of daylight. All trucks came into the area by night, and had to be clear of it before dawn. In this way 1500

tons of ammunition, 3170 tons of POL (about 700,000 gallons) and 672 tons of food were laid in, besides water, spare parts, equipment and the many other items needed to put punch into a left hook.

The various commodities were laid down in dumps, covering a vast area, the whole being divided into separate sections for the different 'lines'. On 12 March Lieutenant Burkitt, with eleven Petrol Company other ranks, ¹² left the Company with the first Administration Group convoy to 'recce' and take charge of the POL section. Secrecy was a keynote for the whole operation. Badges and shoulder tabs were removed, truck emblems painted out. Travelling was done at night, without lights. Notices along the approach track warned: 'You are under enemy observation at this point'. At 9 p.m. on 15 March the first incoming convoy arrived, others following at intervals until 2 a.m. By that time Burkitt's POL section had handled 349 truckloads, totalling 200,000 gallons of petrol, plus a proportion of oils.

Burkitt reports: 'With two exceptions convoys were RASC Coys which for the most part arrived in haphazard condition making checking of loads, distribution to correct areas etc. very difficult. A noticeable feature was the bad mechanical condition of a good number of the vehicles, some of them even breaking down on the ingress track, adding to the traffic difficulties. Leakage appeared to be bad and it was decided to write off 10% in the Stock Book.' Next day an Indian labour platoon turned up and the men were put to work straightening out dumps, camouflaging, and moving the 44-gallon drums so that the bungs were uppermost, to prevent undue leakage. At 8 p.m. NZASC convoys began to arrive ('a treat to handle', Burkitt notes) and by 10.30 p.m. 262 vehicles had been checked in, unloaded, and cleared from the area. 'The next six hours were taken up in the handling of 208 RASC vehicles and getting them clear before dawn. Altogether a fairly big night—470 inward loads with a harvest of 290,000 gallons plus substantial oil packs.'

While Sam Burkitt and his detachment were thus coping with a man-sized job at the FMC, the Company, at its Ben Gardane camp, was

busy assimilating three new platoons, totalling 211 reinforcement drivers and NCOs, who had marched in, on 11 March, after a long trek from **Maadi**. This influx involved a reshuffle of officers, who were then dealt out as follows: Company Headquarters: Major Forbes, OC, Capt Browne, Petrol Supply Officer, 2 Lt Baldwin, HQ subaltern; No. 1 Platoon: Capt Palmer i/c, 2 Lt Roberts 2 i/c; No. 2 Pl: Capt Lyon i/c, Lt Burkitt 2 i/c; No. 3 Pl: Capt Washbourn i/c, 2 Lt Bailey 2 i/c; No. 4 Pl: Capt Butt i/c, 2 Lt Slyfield 2 i/c; No. 5 Pl: Capt Aickin i/c, 2 Lt Knyvett 2 i/c; Workshops: Capt Trewby i/c, Lt Kennerley 2 i/c. The Company strength now stood at 15 officers, 539 other ranks.

By 18 March **New Zealand Corps** had assembled, without detection, on Eighth Army's southern flank in an area west of the FMC. To reach it they had filtered through Wilder's Gap, named after a New Zealand officer ¹³ of the LRDG who discovered it. The need for secrecy now over, badges and emblems could be shown again. That day, and the previous one, NZ Corps had built up its supplies of POL. Petrol Company's empty trucks were then refilled from the FMC at **Bir Amir**. This relieved Burkitt of 150,000 gallons from his total intake, to date, of 600,000. The Corps now carried petrol to its maximum capacity—enough for at least 300 miles in its first-line transport, with a further 100 miles on wheels in the second-line vehicles. Petrol Company carried 100,000 gallons and would draw while en route from the NZFMC, which was to be 'leap-frogged' forward during the advance. In his last few days at the FMC, Burkitt saw to the filling of a large number of empty jerricans, using a mobile pumping plant (or 'mechanical cow') designed and constructed by Divisional Petrol Workshops. His Indian labour, 'enthusiastic, but not particularly efficient', operated the filler, drawing mainly from leaking flimsies. On 21 March Burkitt closed the books at **Bir Amir**, his detachment joining up with the main NZASC Group.

With Major Forbes as OC, this Group had moved forward when **NZ Corps** advanced on the evening of 19 March. In bright moonlight (the only kind of light allowed) the vast concourse of 6000 vehicles—trucks, guns, tanks, carriers, jeeps, staff cars, bulldozers, tank transporters—

rolled onward over hummocks and wadis, the nine-wide column reaching across the desert to the farthest horizon. Ahead went a screen of armoured cars followed by tanks and guns: then came the infantry, headquarters group, B Echelon, and so on. Farther back was the ASC Group and, protecting the rear, two French groups and anti-tank guns. Eighth Army's big push against **Mareth** had begun. Next day the GOC-in-C issued the following message:

1. On 5th March Rommel addressed his troops in the mountains overlooking our positions and said that if they did not take Medenine, and force the Eighth Army to withdraw, then the days of the Axis forces in North Africa were numbered. The next day, 6th March, he attacked the Eighth Army. He should have known that the Eighth Army NEVER WITHDRAWS; therefore his attack could end only in failure—which it did.
2. We will now show Rommel that he was right in the statement he made to his troops. The days of the Axis forces in North Africa are indeed numbered. The Eighth Army and the Western **Desert Air Force**, together constituting one fighting machine, are ready to advance. We all know what that means; and so does the enemy.
3. In the battle that is now to start, the Eighth Army:
 - (a) Will destroy the enemy now facing us in the **Mareth** position.
 - (b) Will burst through the **Gabes Gap**.
 - (c) Will then drive northwards on **Sfax**, **Sousse**, and finally **Tunis**.
4. We will not stop, or let up, till **Tunis** has been captured, and the enemy has either given up the struggle or has been pushed into the sea.
5. The operations now about to begin will mark the close of the campaign in North Africa. Once the battle starts the eyes of the whole world will be on the Eighth Army, and millions of people will listen to the wireless every day—hoping anxiously for good news, and plenty of it, every day. If each one of us does his duty, and pulls his full weight, then nothing can stop the Eighth Army. And nothing will stop it.
6. With faith in God, and in the justice of our cause, let us go forward to victory.
7. FORWARD TO TUNIS! DRIVE THE ENEMY INTO THE SEA!

Bombastic, if you like! But once again words were matched with deeds. And once more the enemy danced to our tune. He threw in his

reserves as we wished, against **30 Corps** on our right. Not quite so obligingly, he counter-attacked and drove us off. By 2 a.m. on 23 March, **30 Corps** had lost all its gains in that sector, and we were back to where we had started. But the **New Zealand Corps**, in a swift advance, had already reached Tebaga, had breached the enemy line there, and was extending its bridgehead; so I Armoured Division was taken from reserve and sent forward to join us. The 'left hook' now became the main thrust. Another was launched, with 4 Indian Division, against the **Matmata** hill positions in the centre. These moves put the enemy off balance. He realised, too late, what was happening at Tebaga, and began to switch reserves. But changing horses in mid-stream is proverbially risky, and here it led to the Germans' undoing.

Soon after midnight on 19-20 March **NZ Corps** had reached its scheduled lying-up area, immediately south of the Wadi Aredj. Petrol Company halted at 2 a.m. It then issued petrol for Corps vehicles to top up, and the empty load-carriers immediately turned round and went back to the FMC to refill. Further issues were made later in the morning, and at 10 a.m. more empty vehicles were sent back to reload. by this time gunfire could be heard to the north, and word spread around that our forward troops, which by then were across the wadi, had bumped up against **21 Panzer Division**. In point of fact, enemy interference had been limited to running engagements at the head of the column, where the King's Dragoon Guards had been fired on by troops from 3 *Reconnaissance Unit* using six 105-millimetre guns and two 25-pounders. Few in number, these hostile elements made no determined effort to oppose the advance of **NZ Corps**.

At 4 p.m. (20 March) Rear Corps pulled out, followed by Petrol Company leading the NZASC Group. Again the column travelled nine abreast, but was forced to converge when passing through a minefield at 5.50 p.m. Damaged and burnt-out trucks were seen; also Corps vehicles stuck in soft sand, the drivers sweating and cursing, as usual, in their efforts to extricate them. Also as usual, the passing soldiery shouted gratuitous comments and advice (not always strictly to the point) and

received their reward in profanity and abuse. A hitch with a friendly tow-rope usually ended these performances. That night the column halted at a place called **APPLE** in our code-signals, and within sight of plum, our first enemy-held objective—the Tebaga range.

Next evening **Freyberg** attacked, with initial success, 6 Brigade capturing the vital plum. For several days **NZ Corps** then battled to widen its bridgehead and get the armour through to **PEACH** and **GRAPE**, up towards **El Hamma** and **Gabes** in the rear of the German Mareth positions. With the combatant troops thus occupied, Service units toiled no less strenuously to move the NZFMC forward from **Bir Amir** to a handier location, near **Bir Soltane**. On 22 March, Lieutenant Burkitt and his detachment, together with the other NZFMC groups, opened for business in the new area. When the last convoy checked in, at eight o'clock that night, 117 vehicles had arrived, bringing 65,000 gallons, plus oils. Rear areas were bombed and strafed that night, giving our reinforcements their baptism of fire. By 25 March **10 Corps** Headquarters and I Armoured Division had caught up with **NZ Corps**. Next day Burkitt handed over to Captain Morgan, of 36 DID, and the NZFMC was disbanded. It then held 269,000 gallons MT, 51,000 gallons HOP and 2700 gallons AGO, plus oils.

Tenth Corps lost no time in getting down to business. Its commander, Lieutenant-General Horrocks, arrived during the afternoon of 24 March and assumed operational command at 6 p.m. the following day. He attended a conference with **Freyberg** and discussed plans for a combined effort to force the Tebaga bottleneck and get the armour out into open country beyond, where it could operate towards **El Hamma** and **Gabes**. It was decided to make a surprise attack in the afternoon of 26 March, with the sun behind us and in the enemy's eyes. A feature of the operation would be a blitz attack by Western **Desert Air Force** during and immediately before the assault by land forces.

The whole 'show' was a brilliant success. The enemy, expecting our usual night attack, was caught by surprise. To add to his troubles, a sandstorm was blowing, with the wind from behind us, so he had dust as

well as the sun in his eyes. Then came the devastating air blitz from twenty-two squadrons of Spitfires, Kitty-bombers and Hurricane 'tank-busters', which shot up everything that moved or appeared in the area beyond the artillery barrage. This has been described as the most complete example to date of the close integration of land and air power. The other arms, too, attacked with great ferocity, smashing down the enemy's resistance. Besides killing and wounding large numbers, we took 2500 prisoners, all Germans, for a loss on our part of about 600, including only eight pilots.

From their area just south of the battle zone, Petrol Company made POL issues that day and watched the large formations of aircraft pass over. At 5 p.m. a Canadian pilot was brought in by 3 Platoon, after crashing in a wadi near the platoon area. He had struck a radio aerial while strafing the enemy at low level, and had hedge-hopped his damaged plane back over our lines. His only injury was a grazed left shoulder. After dining at the officers' mess he was taken over to Rear Corps HQ. Petrol Company's diary notes 'a noisy night'. Next, day, with conditions made unpleasant by the hot dusty wind, petrol issues continued in the Company area, and our empty vehicles took prisoners back to the FMC. That day (27 March), besides evacuating the **Tebaga Gap**, the enemy cleared out from his **Mareth** positions, which had now become untenable, and **30 Corps** in the coastal sector began to advance upon **Gabes**. All that remained for Eighth Army now was to burst through the **Gabes** gap and link up with the Americans. We would then have all Axis forces in North Africa hemmed into an ever-decreasing area. Clearly, the game was up for Jerry.

Gabes fell on 29 March, and Eighth Army chased the Germans on to their next, halting-place, the **Wadi Akarit**. Next day Petrol Company passed through **Tebaga Gap**, with its litter of dugouts, helmets, rifles, burnt-out tanks, wrecked guns and vehicles. We halted 15 miles west of **Gabes**, a pretty little town with shops, schools, and a cinema, but much damaged by bombing. On 1 April Driver **Hagenson**,¹⁴ of 2 Platoon, ran over a mine near the FMC, wrecking the engine, front assembly, and one

rear wheel of his vehicle. He and his



GABS TO ENFIDAVILLE
GABS TO ENFIDAVILLE

spare driver escaped with shock only; but a British soldier passing on a tank transporter was blown to the ground by the explosion and suffered severe laceration of the throat and legs.

Next morning, with **General Freyberg** seated beside him, Montgomery addressed officers and NCOs of the New Zealand Division as they squatted round in the sunshine on sandhills south of Akarit. Informally dressed, and wearing his now familiar black beret, the Army Commander thanked the Division for its great effort and splendid results achieved in the latest 'left hook'. This, he said, had broken enemy resistance and placed the **Mareth** positions in British hands. He also outlined our role for the future. Other troops, he said, would breach the Akarit defences, and the New Zealand Division (which had relinquished Corps status on 31 March and was now in **30 Corps**) would follow through. Eighth Army would then push north and link up with **First Army**, which was pressing in from the west. They would then squeeze the enemy in onto his last stronghold around **Tunis**.

And so it came to pass. Akarit fell on 6 April with 7000 more prisoners in the bag. Two days later we joined hands with the Americans; in another two days we had taken **Sfax**. The surrender rate grew to a

thousand men daily. Petrol Company followed the Division through, replenishing as they went, with daily moves until 13 April, when we 'holed up' in an olive grove near Menzel-Harb, a few miles south of **Sousse**. Our progress on that sunny spring day resembled a triumphal march. At every village—Bagdadi, Bekalta, Teboulba, Moknine—delighted French citizens lined the streets, clapping, cheering, and throwing flowers. Drivers of vehicles temporarily halted were surrounded and kissed by the local belles. But Petrol Company could take it—they had suffered worse fates!

We were riding, now, on the crest of the wave—with victory, victory all the way, and even greater victories ahead. Here, indeed, were the 'fairer lands' that Churchill had promised us; and one Petrol Company warrior wrote home: 'I've never, anywhere, even in New Zealand, seen anything more beautiful than the wild flowers here. I don't know a lot of their names but there were miles and miles, stretching as far as the eye could see, of yellow, red, mauve, violet, and it seemed like another world after having been in the desert for so long. **Iceland** poppies predominated, but there were bags of marigolds, daisies, pincushions, primula, gladioli, forget-me-nots, clover. There were also miles of olive trees, set out in their neat rows, and I just drove through in a semi-daze at the beauty all round me.'

But the war was still with us. Stern fighting lay ahead at **Enfidaville** and **Takrouna**. The German *Luftwaffe*, now concentrated, hit out savagely by day and by night. There was treachery, too, in the form of smiling Arabs, who meandered through our lines (until discouraged by rifle shots) intent on sabotage or pillage. One trick of theirs was to souvenir telephone wires laid out by **Divisional Signals**. Another was the re-planting, after dark, of mines which our sappers had dug up during the day. Even the grubbiest native there seemed to be 'lousy with falouse' and only too ready to purchase army stores. So, many an enterprising Kiwi traded his spare singlet, his underpants, his blankets, his mate's smelly socks, the sweater knitted by Sally back home, for wads of French francs. Even old tea-leaves, thrown out from the

cookhouse, were carefully salvaged and dried—to be sold to the ‘Wogs’ at astronomical profit.

On 13 April, Driver **Crawford**¹⁵ of No. 4 Platoon was injured by an S-mine. Sergeant F. Davey was also slightly damaged. On the 15th, seven live sheep were found among our rations. And as they could scarcely be eaten ‘on the hoof’ they were handed over to ex-butchers in the Company, who were only too willing to show their skill. On 16 April the village of Menzel-Harb, near our lines, was found by the MO to be infected with scabies, smallpox, and other nasty things; so it was put out of bounds. The town of **Sousse** (or what was left of it) had already come under a similar ban. On the 17th the Unit Audit Board, comprising Second-Lieutenant **Knyvett**¹⁶ Sergeant Quilter and Sergeant **Broadbelt**,¹⁷ was convened to audit the accounts of the Company's Regimental Funds.

Petrol Company (less Workshops) moved on 19 April, noting during the day many **RAF** formations overhead, and, at night, a heavy barrage to the north where 5 and 6 NZ Infantry Brigades were storming their last main objective in North **Africa**—the heights above **Enfidaville**, with the steep Takrouna pinnacle a dominating feature. Some ground was gained, but the going was tough. Fifth Brigade was withdrawn on the night of 23-24 April, and 6 Brigade, after making a further advance, was pulled out three nights later. Alexander did not like this plugging through the hills; it was, he considered, **First Army's** job to strike the main blow, since the ground on its front was more open and better suited to the use of armour. **First Army** tried, on 23 April, but failed to break through to **Tunis**. On 6 May it tried again, augmented by Eighth Army's **7 Armoured Division**, 4 Indian Division, 201 Guards Brigade and some extra artillery. With them went General Horrocks to stage the corps attack. This time they made it. Next day both **Tunis** and **Bizerta** fell, and the enemy was squeezed up into the **Cape Bon** peninsula.

On 22 April, ten load-carriers from I Platoon set out at daybreak for Advanced Base, **2 NZEF**, at **Tripoli**, to pick up New Zealand Forces Club stores for distribution to the Division. When the convoy returned, on 26

April, the subaltern in charge (Second-Lieutenant **Roberts**¹⁸ brought sad news. On the 24th the detachment had camped for the night about a mile north of **Medenine**. Two men had entered a disused hole, intending to erect their bivvies there, when an S-mine exploded, killing one and badly wounding the other. A third man then entered the hole to extricate his wounded comrade, but exploded two more S-mines in the process and caused further casualties. These were: killed, Drivers **T. H. Christison**,¹⁹ **D. C. W. Meurk**,²⁰ **R. J. Davis**²¹ (all Petrol Company), Lieutenant **R. D. Jenkins**²² (NZ Forces Club), Driver **F. A. Kelly**²³ (reinforcement for Ammunition Company); wounded, Driver **D. J. Craig**²⁴ (Petrol Company) and five other rank reinforcements for infantry battalions; slightly wounded and returned to unit, Corporal **S. J. Hobbs** and Driver **K. Feist**²⁵ (both of Petrol Company). A padre was not available, so Second-Lieutenant Roberts read extracts from the soldier's burial service over each body the following morning, and a burial party remained behind when the convoy continued its journey.

New Zealand's Minister of Defence (the **Hon. F. Jones**) visited the Company on 28 April, addressing a parade and inviting questions. A number of 'tired soldiers' (who, we had heard from New Zealand sources, might soon be going home for a rest) had their inquiries tactfully countered. That day **NAAFI** stores were issued, but only on a very small scale considering the length of time we had been without canteen supplies. Hopes were then pinned on the issue of NZ Forces Club stores, to be made on 30 April. But these, also, proved disappointing. The war diary for that day is unusually plaintive: 'We should really be grateful for small mercies, but the allocation was small, and was sold before canteen managers had time to put the goods on their shelves. Cigarettes averaged 10 per man; chocolate at less than one small stick per man, and other goods similarly short.'

But better times lay close ahead. On 12 May (while New Zealanders at **Enfidaville** were staging their Donkey Derby) the enemy caved in. His position at **Cape Bon** was hopeless in the extreme; not even a '**Dunkirk**' could save him now—and **Hitler** had no mind to try one. There was

nothing left but wholesale surrender—of some 248,000 men, with all their stores, dumps, equipment, weapons. For the Axis this was a major disaster; for us, a reverberating triumph. The war in **Africa**, at last, was over.

¹ **Capt F. C. Aickin**, m.i.d.; **Hamilton**; born **Scotland**, 21 Jan 1910; agent.

² **Lt J. H. Templeton**; **Wainuiomata**; born **Napier**, 1 Jun 1913; civil servant; wounded 17 May 1943.

³ **Capt J. K. Palmer**; **Dunedin**; born **England**, 21 Jun 1911; motor driver.

⁴ **Lt W. E. Baldwin**; **Ryal Bush**, **Southland**; born **Invercargill**, 22 Sep 1916; van driver.

⁵ **Lt K. R. D. Drummond**, BEM; **Hastings**; born **Dannevirke**, 16 Jun 1918; motor mechanic.

⁶ **S-Sgt T. J. C. Dennison**; **Waimate**; born **NZ** 30 Jan 1906; garage manager.

⁷ **Dvr W. O. Coburn**; born **Dunedin**, 31 Jul 1916; labourer.

⁸ **Sgt S. J. Hobbs**; **Lower Hutt**; born **NZ** 25 Jul 1916; soapworker; wounded 24 Apr 1943.

⁹ **WO II R. Gay**; born **Hokitika**, 9 Nov 1904; transport driver.

¹⁰ **Sgt M. W. Hainsworth**; **Wellington**; born **Leeds**, **England**, 26 Aug 1913; linotype operator.

¹¹ **Unserviceable.**

12 Joined later by two from Supply Company.

13 Capt (later Lt-Col) N. P. Wilder.

14 Dvr L. F. Hagenson; Ohura, Taranaki; born Ohura. 30 Jun 1918; millhand; wounded 1 Apr 1943.

15 Dvr I. J. Crawford; Hawera; born NZ 11 Aug 1908; clerk; wounded 13 Apr 1943.

16 Capt M. A. Knyvett; Wellington; born Auckland, 18 Aug 1913; insurance inspector.

17 Sgt J. S. Broadbelt; Auckland; born Ohakune, 24 Apr 1912; civil servant.

18 Lt B. W. Roberts, MM; Christchurch; born NZ 6 Dec 1914; truck driver.

19 Dvr T. H. Christison; born Wellington, 23 Jul 1906; motor driver; killed in action 24 Apr 1943.

20 Dvr D. C. W. Meurk; born Greymouth, 19 Nov 1917; labourer; killed in action 24 Apr 1943.

21 Dvr R. J. Davis; born NZ 19 Jan 1912; quarryman; killed in action 24 Apr 1943.

22 Lt R. D. Jenkins; born Invercargill, 22 Oct 1918; storeman clerk; killed in action 24 Apr 1943.

23 Dvr F. A. Kelly; born Opotiki, 31 May 1913; truck driver; killed in action 24 Apr 1943.

**²⁴ Dvr D. J. Craig; Lower Hutt; born NZ 25 Dec 1913;
firebrigadesman; wounded 24 Apr 1943.**

**²⁵ Dvr K. Feist; Lower Hutt; born Masterton, 11 May 1909;
carpenter; wounded 24 Apr 1943.**

PETROL COMPANY

CHAPTER 15 – ON TO ITALY

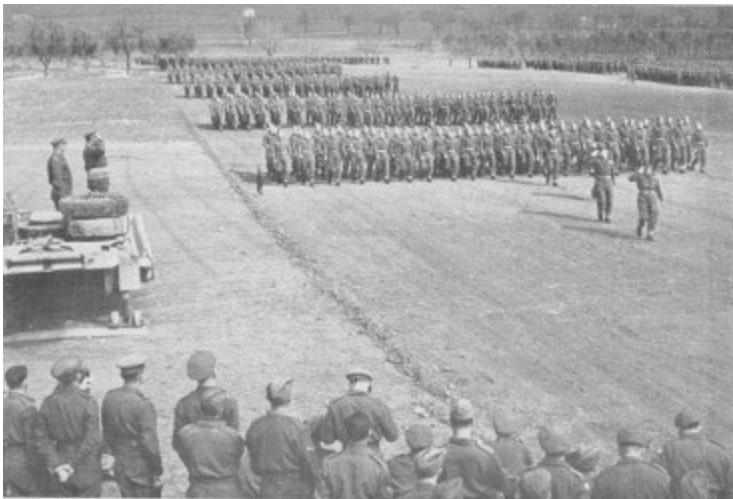
CHAPTER 15

On to Italy

By mid-May 1943, the tides of war had swept the enemy right out of North Africa and carried the New Zealand Division nearly 2000 miles from its main **Middle East** base at **Maadi**. Now we had to face about and make the long journey back again, through lands and by pathways fraught with memories and strewn with reminders. Over some of those miles the Division had toiled and fought not once but many times, taking knocks and giving them, in a struggle that had lasted two and a half years. The return came almost as an anti-climax. We were not being pushed back; not scuttling back to avoid disaster; not even 'withdrawing according to plan'. We were simply *going back*—and that, somehow, seemed flat and flavourless.

Petrol Company's movement order was issued to the platoons on 14 May—with the starting time set for 5.15 a.m. next day. There was, however, some prior notice, since on 13 May Major Forbes got verbal warning that a move back to Egypt would start on the 15th. On 13 May, also, an instruction was issued that no vehicles of **2 NZ Division** were to proceed to **Tunis**; but next day permission was given for a visit to the city by a sightseeing party which included twelve men from Divisional Petrol Company. Our company provided a 3-ton truck to take their own quota and that of Divisional Ammunition Company.

May the 14th was a hectic day for Petrol Company, which now faced the mammoth task of refuelling the Division for and during its long trek back to Egypt. Units had orders to get enough petrol in hand for 300 miles; so demands from all quarters were heavy. Since our own trucks, also, were to move off fully loaded, the platoons stocked up at 227 FMC. They returned there all HOP holdings, drawing MT petrol instead. When supply ceased at 6 p.m., Nos. 1 and 3 Platoons were ordered to take their empty vehicles direct to **Sfax**, refill there,



ASC personnel march past General Freyberg at a parade in the
Volturno Valley, January 1944

**ASC personnel march past General Freyberg at a parade in the Volturno Valley, January
1944**

3 Platoon dispersed off Route 6 near Mignano



3 Platoon dispersed off Route 6 near Mignano



Hove Dump

Hove Dump

Petrol Point at Alvito, June 1944



Petrol Point at Alvito, June 1944

Ancona



Ancona



Petrol Company vehicles in Forli

Petrol Company vehicles in Forli

Crossing the Po River, April 1945



Crossing the Po River, April 1945



Maj A. C. Dickson
Maj A. C. Dickson



Majors G. G. Good and G. S. Forbes

Majors G. G. Good and G. S. Forbes



Brigadier S. H. Crump
Commander, NZASC,
and
officers who commanded the
Divisional Petrol Company

Brigadier S. H. Crump

Commander, NZASC, and officers who commanded the Divisional Petrol Company



Maj W. A. G. Washbourn
Maj W. A. G. Washbourn



Maj H. W. Barnett
Maj H. W. Barnett



ITALY MAP No.1

and continue on to the Division's staging area at **Ben Gardane**. That night a long 'drought' was broken by the issue of two bottles of beer per man.

Next morning Company Headquarters, 2, 4, 5 Platoons and Workshops, in that order, moved out in column of route, following 4 and 6 NZ Reserve MT Companies, as part of NZASC Group Convoy, Serial I, with Major Stock as OC. The move back to Egypt was to be made over a period of fourteen days. Instructions had been issued for staging areas to be left clean, with all refuse burnt or buried. All buildings en route were to be treated with suspicion, as potential sources of booby traps. Platoons were also instructed to use great care when pulling off the road during halts, and were reminded that the area from **Misurata** to **El Agheila** was not yet cleared of mines and booby traps.

At Kairouan the head of the convoy took a wrong turning while seeking a mysterious 'Y track' named in the Divisional movement order. The upshot was that at one stage Petrol and Supply Companies found themselves travelling as an independent convoy and gumming up roads required for the use of other units. This and other troubles were finally sorted out and by 9 p.m. our Company halted at the appointed staging area, after travelling 200 hot, dusty and often execrable miles. A Workshops detachment, under Captain Trewby, was still back at the old area with instructions to complete urgent work in hand and then follow the Company as soon as possible via the main road.

Next day (16 May) Forbes went on ahead, taking the Signals van to act as an intermediary station between advance party Signals and Divisional Headquarters. He reached the **Ben Gardane** staging area at 11.30 a.m., finding Nos. 1 and 3 Platoons already there, as ordered. The platoons were told to dump their loads forthwith and proceed to **Tripoli**, reload, and camp in that staging area, where a petrol point would be opened on the arrival of the Division. Forbes next made contact with Ammunition Company, which was then travelling ahead of the Division with orders to dump their ammunition at 501 AAD and reload four

platoons with MT petrol at **Tripoli**. The Company, again following 4 and 6 Reserve MT Companies, left **Ben Gardane** at 7 a.m., passing through **Mareth** about four hours later. At 3.30 p.m. we made camp in a sandy area near Kilo 70 and opened a petrol point, issuing from the loads of Nos. 2, 4 and 5 Platoons which they dumped on the ground. The detached platoons (Nos. 1 and 3) halted for the night at 8 p.m. close to No. 3 Petrol Depot, five miles west of **Tripoli**; but the Divisional Ammunition Company convoy was not so lucky, as Movement Control pushed them off the road ten miles short of **Tripoli** to allow 150 tank transporters, also travelling in front of the Division, to get clear by morning.

At 6.55 a.m. on 17 May, as the Company was preparing to move from its overnight camp at Kilo 70, an explosion occurred in 4 Platoon's area. Second-Lieutenant Templeton, in a 15-cwt, had run over a mine. He was blown through the hatch and sustained leg injuries, but was able to remain with the Company. His batman (Driver **Chammen**¹) suffered injuries and shock and was evacuated to hospital. The main Company pulled out at 7.5 a.m. and had a good run over rough roads, crossing the **Tunisia- Tripolitania** border at 9 a.m., then on through **Zuara, Sabratha, Zavia** and **Zanzour** to **Suani Ben Adem**. The staging area was reached at 4.30 p.m., with 135 miles covered that day. At night a concert given in **Tripoli** by the **Kiwi Concert Party** drew a large and vociferous audience. During the day, Nos. 1 and 3 Platoons had reloaded at No. 3 Petrol Depot and dumped on the staging area. Ammunition Company had quitted their ammunition and reloaded with petrol, which they also brought to the staging area.

No move was made on 18 May. The Company drew four days' rations from Divisional Supply Company; Patriotic Fund parcels were distributed, along with cigarettes and tobacco. An issue of beer was made, one bottle per man. North African currency (francs and sous) was called in and exchanged for Egyptian and BMA money. At a conference with his platoon commanders Major Forbes detailed plans for the next phase of the move, ordering 5 Platoon and part of No. 4 to be detached

and remain behind at **Tripoli** to unload mail at the port and to help move the Division's Advanced Base to **Cairo**. The remainder of No. 4 Platoon—two sections—were placed under command of Nos. 2 and 3 Platoons respectively. The **Tripoli** detachment was expected to complete its assignment by 27 May. Corporal Aitken (Workshops) went on ahead to **Benghazi** with Drivers Christison ² and **Foster** ³ to try to pick up truck tyres from salvage dumps along the road. For, despite close attention to pressures, with checks made at all halts, a considerable number of tyres had already collapsed. Corporal **Clemmens** ⁴ and Driver Williams (Workshops) were also detached at **Tripoli** to service Company vehicles left behind there.

The balance of Petrol Company left **Tripoli** at 6.30 a.m. on 19 May, on good roads which made travelling a pleasure after so much bumping over rough tracks and desert. We camped that night with another 140 miles notched, but with some uncertainty as to whether a move would be made next day. The road, some 30 miles ahead, had been washed out by a cloudburst. By 6.15 p.m. on 20 May, however, a deviation had been built across swampy country and our convoy set off again in bright moonlight, passing a long column of loaded tank transporters held up at the washout. We covered 71 miles that night, and another 109 miles by lunchtime next day, when Major Bracegirdle instructed Forbes to open a petrol point at **Nofilia**, the next staging area, 73 miles farther on. The point was to remain open on 22 May to service 6 Brigade, due to arrive that day in the 'second flight'. It would be supplied from the petrol carried by Divisional Ammunition Company, and Captain Browne was detailed to oversee the issuing.

By 23 May our Company had by-passed **Benghazi** and reached the next staging area ten miles east of that town. Here a novel plan was suggested for refuelling the first flight, since our Company's resources proved unequal to the task of supplying heavy petrol-tank requirements plus the balance needed to build up unit holdings to the requisite 200 miles. This plan—viewed with alarm at first by the Area Commander and the S and T people—was for the whole of the first flight convoy,

extending over 40 miles in length—to drive through the Petrol Depot, where each vehicle would pick up its requirements, in 4-gallon ‘flimsies’, before going on to the staging area. At the last moment this plan was agreed to, and it worked very well.

So, step by step, the Division returned—through **Barce, Derna, Tobruk, Bardia**—crossing the Egyptian border on 27 May. A few days later Petrol Company was back in **Maadi Camp**, facing one of the biggest ‘flaps’ the Division had yet experienced. After lunch on the last day of May 1943, Major Forbes paraded his company and read out the names of First, Second and Third Echelon men who had been granted leave to return for three months to New Zealand or the United Kingdom. Deputies were appointed to replace officers and NCOs thus listed—and thereafter many of the Ruapehu draft (as they were called) embarked on a long and glorious ‘binge’. This was shared by a sorry few whose length of service qualified them for inclusion, but who were held back in the interests of the service. Others joined the binge from sympathy with one or other of these two groups; while others again just piled in on general principle.

Eventually all this straightened out, reinforcements marched in, and the amenities of **Maadi Camp**, with its hot showers, NAAFI, the various ‘huts’ (well-found recreation buildings, actually), hairdressers, dhobis, cinemas and so on, were enjoyed to the full. A large amount of mail, both letter and parcel, had arrived from New Zealand, adding to the general sense of well-being. Fourteen days’ leave was granted to **Cairo, Alexandria, Nathaniya** or **Sidi Bishr**, with a subsistence allowance of three shillings a day for those going to **Cairo** or **Alex**. At **Sidi Bishr** the men could stay free of charge at I NZ Leave Camp; a **Middle East** leave camp, run by the Tommies, provided similar facilities at **Nathaniya**.

For a time—from 11 to 30 July—Petrol Company ran its own special leave camp, with Captain Burkitt in charge, at **Sidi Bishr**. Before that, a detachment under Captain Butt, comprising Nos. 3, 4 and 5 Platoons plus No. II Section of Workshops, had been detached for duty at I NZ Leave Camp. This, and the transport of Ruapehu parties and their baggage, with miscellaneous backloads, were the Company's main

commitments. On 11 July the balance of Petrol Company moved out from **Maadi** to a new camp area at **Fayoum**. Relays of six vehicles departed at ten-minute intervals throughout the day, and by evening the platoons and Company Headquarters had settled in their new camp. There they remained on routine training duties, including the 'running in' of reinforcements, until Sunday, 19 September, when the Company moved again, this time to **Burg el Arab**. Most of the Division travelled there on foot from **Maadi**, a distance of over 80 miles, and the longest march ever undertaken by **2 NZ Division**.

Meanwhile the war, with its broader issues, was proceeding apace. The Fifth (American) Army and Eighth Army—minus the New Zealanders—had struck across the **Mediterranean** to **Sicily**, and thence on to invade the Italian mainland. Under this pressure Italian resistance, never whole-hearted, collapsed altogether. Mussolini was deposed; Marshal Badoglio took the lead, and secretly negotiated an armistice. The Italians then became 'co-belligerents'; and the Allied armies pushed on to **Termoli** without encountering much resistance. By September 1943 the New Zealand Division was preparing, with the consent of the **New Zealand Government**, to move to **Italy**, where Montgomery proposed to use our force—now reorganised and re-equipped—as an independent division directly under Eighth Army. Fourth Armoured Brigade had rejoined the Division with over 150 Sherman tanks, giving New Zealand armoured support to New Zealand infantry for the first time. The Division, now a 'mixed' formation instead of a purely infantry one, had 4500 wheeled vehicles (1090 of them in the ASC) and was considered the equal in fighting power to any two German divisions.

Petrol Company moved 'piecemeal' to **Italy** in various flights and parties, their departures spaced over a period of several weeks. Our Advance Party, numbering 4 officers and 92 other ranks, moved out on 3 October, setting up camp five miles from **Taranto** less than a week later. This party drew rations from an improvised BSD, set up in a cow byre, among lowing cattle! A feature of the 'new life' was an evening wine issue, though none was made on 12 October when transport, in the form

of an aged horse and a very old cart, failed to return with its 50-gallon load! Other Petrol Company groups left Egypt in charge of Second-Lieutenants **Slyfield**⁵ and **Chalmers**⁶ and Major Forbes. As OC Troops on Transport AZB (the *Coonibe Hill*), Forbes had responsibility for the feeding arrangements, water-supply, AA defence, boat-drill and general welfare of 160 men.

Cooking facilities, our OC found, were primitive. The after- hold of the 10,000-ton freighter had been fitted with wooden partitions to provide cramped quarters for troops. Next were the main holds, loaded with vehicles and POL, some leaking. So 'cookhouses' had to be rigged in a clear space on the upper deck, their construction being improvised from tarpaulins, sandbags and asbestos sheeting. Despite these difficulties our cooks, as usual, did a first-class job. So good were their menus, in fact, that the ship's crew were soon noticed lining up in the army mess queues, to the disregard of their own rations (including fresh meat, not available to the troops) which often enough went over the side. There was argument, too, about bread-supply, the crusty old skipper refusing to extend his bakehouse facilities for the benefit of troops. But Kiwis have a habit of getting what they want—and one way and another bread was procured.

By 8 a.m. on 13 November the *Coonibe Hill* anchored at **Bari**, where the *Port Frederick* (Second-Lieutenant Chalmers, OC Troops) and other ships carrying Petrol Company vehicles and drivers had already arrived. On 6 November, while the *Port Frederick* still lay at anchor, enemy planes came over **Bari** at 10 p.m., evoking a terrific barrage from the port defences. No bombs were dropped, the enemy supposedly laying mines. During the unloading, Driver **Ellison**⁷ sustained a broken arm as a result of being crushed between two trucks. On shore that same day, Driver **Walsh**⁸ lost his life in a road accident. He was buried next day in the British military section of the **Altamura** cemetery. Father Callaghan⁹ conducted the funeral service, with the aid of a local Franciscan priest.

By 17 November the Company, now complete with vehicles and

Workshops, was encamped at Ururi. A brief stay had been made at **Lucera**, where it was intended that **2 NZ Division** would remain in reserve while other formations faced the Germans in their **Winter Line** along the River Sangro. But that plan was changed; Eighth Army would attack across the **Sangro**, with the New Zealand Division, flanked by 5 and 13 Corps, concentrated among the steep ridges between **Furci** and **Gissi**. Petrol Company's location at Ururi was on the more level country near Larino.

The Company's first task in the new area was to uplift petrol from the FMC at Larino and take it forward some 70 miles to a new dump at the 'Red House', near **Gissi**. There Captain Butt had made his headquarters, to supervise issues to Divisional units and oversee the unloading and stacking. At the same time Second-Lieutenant **Burt**,¹⁰ of Petrol Company, opened a POL dump on the Larino- **Termoli** road. This dump was supplied by 10-ton trucks of the RASC and worked by Basutoland labour.

About that time, it seems, there was some slight hitch over rations; and one observer noted that our drivers, on their infrequent return to section cookhouses, 'found the old bounteous cordiality shrivelled to a niggardly anxiety'. He adds that for about a week his section lived chiefly on dunked biscuits and milk. The milk arrived in the nature of a windfall, when a Tommy driver with an unchecked 10-ton load invited the section to help themselves. 'Take the bloody lot', was his expansive offer.

Back at Larino, while stocks were being cleared from the FMC, Padre **Sergel**¹¹ ran a 'pull-up joint' in an implement shed, where drivers could forget the rain, and their nightmare journeys, over a cup of steaming 'chai'. The Padre's right-hand man was Petrol Company's Hori Perston (now with three stripes up), who foraged afield and was sometimes able to provide pork, lamb-chops, fried eggs and boiled puddings.

Our Division, it was hoped, would advance quickly to **Avezzano**, and thence to **Rome**. Its move into the front line took place from 18 to 22

November; and what that meant in terms of discomfort, difficulties and frustrations will well be remembered by those who took part. No more underfoot was the dry, untrammelled desert. Instead, our convoys crawled along, often in low gear, on steep, snaking roads congested with traffic. Main highways gave better going; but such was the amount of 'stuff' going up—and down—that main roads often had to be avoided, and slushy by-ways, lanes and cart-tracks used instead. For obstacles there were demolitions (Jerry had done a thorough job there), detours and temporary bridges, with room for only single-lane traffic. Off the roads were mines, steep drops, and mud—endless mud; while weeping skies and the bitter cold brought their own peculiar troubles. These included a number of burst radiators, despite the issue of anti-freeze fluid and detailed instructions for avoiding such mishaps.

On 21 November Company Headquarters and the headquarters vehicles of Nos. 1, 2, 4, 5 Platoons, plus Workshops, moved from Ururi to a more forward area near Liscia. Platoon transport was still carrying POL from Larino and **San Severo** to No. 2 FMC near **Gissi**, where Captain Butt remained with a small group to supervise dumping and make issues to the Division. Heavy rains soon turned the new area into a quagmire, so that vehicles had great difficulty moving in and out. To add to their troubles, drivers encountered an acute tyre shortage and mechanical defects in their reconditioned engines.

Thus Petrol Company's lot during their first winter in **Italy** was, like the stage policeman's, 'not a happy one'. Some light relief came on 26 November when, about 5 p.m., the evening's peace was shattered by the arrival in Workshops' area of some very agitated villagers. These proclaimed excitedly that three Germans had taken possession of a barn and locked themselves in. So a Petrol Company 'patrol', armed to the teeth with a variety of weapons, set off to capture the wily Hun. The foe was commanded, in the name of the King, to come forth; but he didn't. Our warriors thereupon fired a shot—in what direction is not recorded—but it had the desired effect. Three cold and hungry Tommies emerged. Cut off from their unit, they had made their own way back from the

Sangro River, 'holing up' for the night in the Ities' barn. A good feed and dry bedding were soon provided, and next day the men took off to rejoin their comrades.



SANGRO RIVER—ORSOGNA AREA

By the end of November all stocks of POL had been cleared from Larino and another forward dump established beyond Gissi, at Atessa. On the last day of the month Company Headquarters also moved to Atessa. A consignment of engine assemblies and tyres, brought from Bari by 6 RMT Company, promised relief for some at least of our drivers' worries. Issues for the month were: MT petrol, 583,954 gallons; Derv, 65,680 gallons; ¹² kerosene, 6380 gallons; oils, 22,189 gallons; grease, 7680 lb; anti-freeze (glycol), 630 gallons. The Company's mileage for November totalled 133,527.

Meanwhile the enemy had been pushed back across the Sangro River, and patrols in our sector made their first crossings on the night of 19-20 November. Eighth Army planned to attack in force across the river, and two regiments of 8 Indian Division succeeded in getting over in the early hours of the 23rd, under supporting fire from New Zealand artillery. But heavy rain that day, and on the previous night, caused the river to rise, the water now being neck-deep in places, and swift enough to sweep men off their feet. The main attack was postponed, and our hopes of a quick break-through on the Sangro gradually faded.

Nevertheless the New Zealand Division, with 8 Indian and 78 British Divisions, established a bridgehead on the night of 27-28 November and stubbornly fought their way along the rain-sodden ridges. By 2 December we had taken **Castelfrentano**.

Our next main objective was **Orsogna**, across the **Moro** River; and throughout December the New Zealand Division and other components of **13 Corps** struggled grimly, but in vain, for its possession. ¹³ That month Petrol Company Headquarters remained at **Atessa**, while the platoons, as usual, ranged far afield. Day and night our convoys slogged away on narrow, greasy roads, uplifting POL from the **Termoli** railhead, and from 2 FMC near **Gissi** (while stocks there lasted), to build up a new 'Sangro Dump' north of the river.

'3 and 4 Plns to uplift Coy POL pack **Termoli** 3 Dec. Down route via **Palata**, up route via **Cupello**.' So reads a typical operation order of that period, issued from Company HQ at 6.15 p.m. on 1 December. That evening Lieutenant **Taylor**, ¹⁴ OC 4 Platoon, conferred with Captain Washbourn of 3 Platoon and arranged for the two platoons to travel as one convoy, with No. 3 in front, led by Washbourn, followed by No. 4 led by Sergeant **Bell**. ¹⁵ No. 4 Platoon's second-in-command (Second-Lieutenant B. W. Roberts) was to go on ahead to make loading arrangements and 'recce' a suitable parking area. Experience had proved that time could be saved by making an early start, the roads generally being clear until 8 a.m. Orders were therefore issued that night to 4 Platoon's section corporals, with reveille set for 6 a.m., breakfast at 6.30, and starting time 7 a.m., when 3 Platoon would be through and clear of the 4 Platoon area.

Second-Lieutenant Roberts relates:

Dawn, fine but cold, was breaking as No 4 Platoon moved off at 0630 hrs. Several days of fine weather had left roads in good condition allowing normal vehicle speed. Our route lay through **Casalanguida**, **Gissi**, **Furci**, **Carunchio**, **Montefalcone**, **Acquaviva**, **Palata**, **Guglionesi** to **Termoli**, that being then the down route of the Div Maintenance Circuit.

No traffic was encountered as far as **Carunchio**, approximately halfway, through which we passed at 0900 hrs. At the village of Acquaviva a convoy of 80 NZ vehicles, ex disembarkation port, was passed. This convoy subsequently caused some delay to the Petrol Company as the defiles caused by demolitions and washouts make this route suitable only for one-way traffic.

At 1115 hrs I applied to 20 MPFC's ¹⁶ check post five miles north of **Termoli** for instructions re loading and was told by an officer there that no authority had been given for issue to NZ Div. I was advised to contact RTO at **Termoli** Station to apply to HQ, 1 FMC. This I did, after leaving a message for Capt Washbourn at the check post. There being no word of a POL pack for NZ Div at the Station I located the OC of No 1 FMC, who decided to ring Rear 8th Army HQ to clarify the position. I arranged then to report back at 1430 hrs and proceeded back to 20 MPFC where I found that our convoy had not yet arrived. We returned to a road junction and lunched while awaiting its arrival.

The head of the convoy appeared at 1400 hrs and I explained the position to Capt Washbourn. After parking both platoons in a field short of 20 MPFC Capt Washbourn and I proceeded to **Termoli**. Rear Army had not then been contacted and we were advised that information would be passed to us through 20 MPFC. At 1600 hrs 20 MPFC were advised that POL for NZ Div would be loaded from that Depot. Loading was commenced immediately. Twelve truckloads of POL salvage had been picked up at Red House en route and this was unloaded at 20 MPFC. All vehicles were loaded by 1900 hrs; orders were given to section corporals for reville at 0430 hrs, start time 0545 hrs.

We duly departed from the area at 0545 hrs, following No 3 Platoon. The weather was again clear and cold, with dry roads clear of all traffic to 0700 hrs allowing normal convoy speed. Our route lay along the main coastal road to the road junction short of **Vasto**, thence through **Cupello** to **Scerni** where the route forks south through **San Giovanni** to the Company area. From San Salvo on the coast to **Cupello** some delay was caused by traffic. Much of this was NZ Maintenance en route to **Termoli**,

which, according to our instructions, was travelling against the correct circuit direction. At 1130 hrs we arrived at Coy HQ area where instructions were given that our loads would be held and not dumped at No 1 FMC as previously arranged. Instructions were received from Coy HQ during the afternoon that 4 Platoon would proceed to No 2 FMC area north of the **Sangro River**, establish a dump of POL there, return, and then proceed again to **Termoli** railhead where we would load the POL pack of 5 December and bring it back to the Company area. This operation would again be carried out in conjunction with No 3 Platoon. At 1800 hrs section corporals were assembled and given orders for the following day, including reveille 0500 hrs, breakfast 0530 hrs, start time 0600 hrs.

So the story goes, in an almost non-stop programme, with long hours and early starts the daily order for our hard-working drivers. On 4 December Lieutenant Taylor's convoy was held up north of **Atessa** by a Canadian airborne brigade strung out along the road. 'We reached the **Sangro Dump**', he says, 'at about 1000 hrs, so it took 3 ½ hours to travel 14 miles. To slow the convoy down even further, the pontoon bridge across the **Sangro** had sunk during the night, leaving only the railway bridge to take all northbound and southbound traffic. We offloaded our petrol at the new dump, then turned about for **Termoli**. Good speed was made until we reached **Casalanguida** where the convoy was again held up, this time by two RASC vehicles which had broken down, completely blocking the road, which could take only one stream of traffic. On reaching **Furci** our convoy was diverted to the coast road to make way for another brigade of Canadians moving up the Div Maintenance Route—supposed to be used by southbound traffic only. Naturally these holdups made the journey irksome, and **Termoli** was not reached until about 1830 hrs instead of the usual 1400 hrs.'

The new Sangro Dump commenced issuing on 9 December. Next day the POL pack for 11 December was uplifted from **Termoli** railhead by thirty-four vehicles—six of No. 1 Platoon and twenty-eight from No. 2—in record time. Led by Captain Burkitt, this convoy did the round trip in

one day. Burkitt was injured at **Termoli** that day, when stacked cans of petrol fell from a railway truck. He was evacuated to 4 NZ Field Ambulance with a broken scapula. No. 4 Platoon and the balance of No. 1 spent the day on vehicle maintenance and oil-changing. Heavy rain fell that night and the next, turning the Company area into a morass. All breakdown trucks were kept busy towing out stuck vehicles. Roads were now becoming increasingly treacherous; but still the work went on. Over the next few days more dumps were laid down at map reference H 3690, with Petrol Company's Sergeant **Hamlin**¹⁷ supervising the work, helped by two sections of Basutos and five other ranks from 5 Platoon. On 14 December 150 three-tonners of 4 and 6 Reserve MT Companies pulled in there with 380 tons of POL, all off-loaded and stacked on the ground in six hours.

Christmas Eve dawned wet and misty, with showers almost continuous throughout the day. Ninety-eight Petrol Company vehicles left the area to pick up a full Corps pack of POL, to be delivered at the Sangro Dump, at 2 FMC, and at 113 FMC, **13 Corps**. Road conditions were particularly bad, requiring the use of chains. Trucks began returning to the Company area late in the evening and continued to arrive until early morning on 25 December. By then all vehicles for the **Sangro** had unloaded and returned; vehicles for 2 FMC had arrived and partly unloaded; No. 4 Platoon had staged for the night en route from **Vasto** to 113 FMC. At 9 a.m. Holy Mass was celebrated in **Atessa** Cathedral, attended by two truckloads of Roman Catholics from Petrol Company, while a church parade for Protestants took place in the Company HQ area, attended by Brigadier Crump and his staff. Some lusty carol singing resulted, to the delight of the civilian population, who quickly gathered round.

Workshops commenced their festivities about 3 p.m. on Christmas Eve with a cask of *vino*, purchased out of canteen funds and issued free. 'After the evening meal', their diary records, 'the Christmas spirit was truly evident ... the local people had thrown their homes open and all gathered round their firesides to sip their vino and join in the sing-songs

that were going on in each house. Undeterred by the weather, the celebrations continued late into the night, and it was well past midnight when the last of the revellers had found their way to bed.' Many were noticeably quiet next morning; but by 1 p.m., when dinner was served, everyone livened up again.

For weeks beforehand, cooks and canteen committees had scoured the countryside seeking certain 'extras' not found on army ration scales even at Christmas. Live hens, ducks, geese and turkeys were gradually acquired, by barter or purchase, and interned in weird pens made from crates, tarpaulins, and camouflage nets. Sergeant Jensen, in his unofficial history of the Company's activities, records:

As the days passed the motley collection grew, and platoons vied with one another in securing the greatest number and the most varied assortment of birds.

'What have you stocked up for Christmas?' a visiting and inquisitive officer from another platoon would ask.

'Oh, just a forty gallon keg of vermouth, eight turkeys, a couple of geese and some hens.'

'Don't you blokes work at all? Just scavenge round the countryside thinking of your stomachs?' His remarks would be prompted by envy, and away he would go to spur his own committee on to greater efforts with exaggerated accounts of the good things he had seen on his visit.

Actually, he had not seen anything at all; for although the platoon he had been visiting undoubtedly had some bedraggled specimens in their coops, the figures quoted were more indicative of the quantity they *hoped* to get, rather than of what they actually had at the time.

Driver **Feisst** ¹⁸ notes in his diary: 'Had a jolly good turnout for Christmas dinner—pork and veges and plum pudding— beer, fruit and nuts. Had some drinks—whisky, vino and beer. Most of the chaps got rather drunk, and Capt. was put to bed about 4 p.m. Had a visit from

Major Forbes; he was very talkative and made a speech.' Workshops Platoon had set up benches for their Christmas dinner in a local barn. 'In their new role as waiters', their diary records, 'the O i/c, MSM and Sgts received much abuse from their "patrons", but what they lacked in experience was outweighed by their willingness.'

Many drivers spent a quiet afternoon catching up on sleep. In the evening mild celebrations continued round the area, some lads joining in folk dances with the local belles, regardless of army boots thick with mud. And so was passed another Christmas overseas, the fourth for a few of the 'old-timers' still left with Petrol Company.

On 28 December three vehicles of No. 14 Section (Workshops Platoon) were destroyed by fire, and Driver **Young**¹⁹ was taken to hospital. News of his death the following afternoon came as a shock to this soldier's many friends, and particularly his comrades in Workshops. A memorial service attended by the whole platoon was held on 30 December in a nearby farmhouse.

Around midnight on New Year's Eve heavy gales and snow wrecked most of the Company's tents, bivvies and lean-tos. And the story goes that one man, slightly intoxicated, was saved from almost certain suffocation by the arrival, at 2 a.m., of his 'room-mate', who excavated both bivvy and sleeper from under a snowdrift.

¹ **Dvr R. H. Chammen; Blenheim; born NZ 1 Sep 1920; traveller; wounded 17 May 1943.**

² **Dvr G. Christison; Carterton; born NZ 3 May 1913; panel-beater.**

³ **Dvr G. Foster; Clive; born England, 29 Jul 1901; rabbitier.**

⁴ **S-Sgt E. W. Clemmens; Palmerston North; born Petone, 1 May 1903; fitter and turner.**

⁵ **Capt A. J. Slyfield; Auckland; born Auckland, 31 May 1913; commercial traveller.**

⁶ **Lt R. M. Chalmers; Wellington; born Outram, 8 Aug 1911; motor mechanic.**

⁷ **Dvr F. K. Ellison; Lower Hutt; born Martinborough, 7 May 1918; farmhand.**

⁸ **Dvr W. M. Walsh; born NZ 1 Jun 1922; labourer; died on active service 6 Nov 1943.**

⁹ **Rev. Fr. V. D. Callaghan; Lower Hutt; born Wellington, 9 Dec 1909; Roman Catholic priest.**

¹⁰ **Capt F. W. Burt, m.i.d.; born Auckland, 14 Nov 1915; tailoring cutter.**

¹¹ **Rev. P. C. S. Sergel, US Silver Star; Hamilton; born NZ 11 May 1907; Anglican minister.**

¹² **Derv—diesel fuel.**

¹³ **In one counter-attack the Germans used two flame-throwing tanks, both of which were knocked out by our defences.**

¹⁴ **Capt L. M. Taylor, m.i.d.; Putaruru; born Hastings, 24 Apr 1917; truck driver.**

¹⁵ **Sgt G. H. Bell; born Waimate, 24 Oct 1911; truck driver.**

¹⁶ **Mobile Petrol Filling Centre.**

¹⁷ S-Sgt C. C. Hamlin, m.i.d.; Matakohē, North Auckland; born NZ 8 Sep 1920; farmer.

¹⁸ Cpl J. F. Feisst; Walton, Waikato; born Matamata, 10 Jun 1915; dairy farmer.

¹⁹ Dvr R. L. Young; born Christchurch, 1 Oct 1919; carpenter; died on active service 29 Dec 1943.

PETROL COMPANY

CHAPTER 16 – ALL ROADS LEAD TO ROME

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All Roads lead to Rome

THE New Year blizzards of 1944 marked the end of our efforts to capture **Orsogna**, and of Eighth Army's plan to reach **Rome** via **Chieti**. Two months of fighting along the River Sangro had cost the New Zealand Division 399 men killed or died of wounds, about 1100 wounded, and 103 captured or missing. For the first two weeks in January our Engineers fought their own private war against snow and slush, attacking with bulldozers, graders and mechanical shovels, and fascinating roads to keep supply routes open.

Troops in the forward area had settled down to a kind of static warfare, known officially as 'offensive defence'. The storms carried away signal lines, filled gunpits and trenches, buried bivvies, blocked roads and bridges. Food and ammunition were packed out by mule train to front-line men who shivered in sodden clothing along the muddy ridges, manning slit trenches and weapon pits sometimes only a few hundred yards from the enemy. Soldiers in the line were frequently relieved, mixing in their off-duty hours with civilians in the nearby towns of **San Eusanio** and **Castelfrentano**. Meanwhile both sides shelled and patrolled continually.

For Petrol Company it was 'business as usual' under the vilest conditions. Despite the sappers' efforts, roads were often axle-deep in snow, or covered with a slushy mixture which squirted in squelching streams from chain-fitted tyres. Driving rain or sleet reduced visibility to zero. Hands, numb even when gloved, clung desperately to ice-cold steering wheels as vehicles slithered and bucked over ruts and potholes. Balaclavas and greatcoats were worn 'round the clock'.

The Company's main chore was a daily run to the railhead at **Vasto** to pick up the Division's POL pack. This was then delivered to the Sangro Dump, where Captain Butt and his detachment still remained, or to a subsidiary dump controlled by Second-Lieutenant Burt. Trucks and

drivers not on this run were fully employed clearing the roads into the Company area, and carting gravel, from the **Sangro** riverbed, to improve it. Workshops, in their whimsical way, spent their leisure hours building toboggans.

On the other side of **Italy**, British, American and French troops of the Fifth Army were also held up. Their 'road to **Rome**' was blocked by powerful enemy defences based on **Cassino**. These defences formed the western end of the Germans' mighty **Gustav Line**, which stretched right across the narrowest part of the peninsula and had first-class natural obstacles in the region's many mountain peaks and ridges.

To avoid stalemate and retain the initiative, the Allies changed their over-all plan. The idea now was to tie down the largest possible enemy force in the east while Fifth Army launched a heavy offensive in the west. The aim was to reach **Rome** via the **Liri** valley, the approach to which was dominated by the forbidding heights of **Montecassino**.

In mid-January, therefore, the New Zealanders handed over to 4 Indian Division in the Adriatic sector and moved across to reinforce Fifth Army. The strictest secrecy attended this move. Badges and shoulder titles were removed, truck emblems painted out. Only a few senior officers knew the Division's ultimate destination.

The bulk of Petrol Company, comprising Company Headquarters, Workshops and Nos. 1, 2 and 5 Platoons, moved off with the NZASC Group at 2.35 a.m. on 14 January. Nos. 3 and 4 Platoons had been detached to uplift 5 Brigade's Bren carriers—awkward loads, each weighing four tons, for vehicles designed to carry three tons. Ahead of Petrol Company and leading the convoy went Headquarters NZASC; behind Petrol Company were Divisional Ammunition and Divisional Supply companies. By 1 p.m. the column had travelled 106 miles and staged on the **San Severo- Lucera** road. Ammunition salvage, carried by Nos. 1 and 5 Platoons, was off-loaded en route at **San Severo**. Nine trucks of 1 Platoon were sent on to **Lucera** to load wheat and flour for delivery at **Naples**.

At 7 a.m. next day the convoy pulled out, travelling through **Lucera**, **Ariano**, **Grottaminarda**, **Avellino** and **Cicciano**, to reach the staging area by 2 p.m., after covering 101 miles. The route traversed some very rough country, with steep grades which taxed the more heavily laden vehicles. Petrol Company had a number of breakdowns, including two Workshops vehicles with major engine trouble, and two from No. 12 Section with their radiators damaged by collision on a steep grade. That afternoon the Company had its first view of Mount Vesuvius, smoking placidly some miles away to the west. At 3 a.m. on 16 January, Petrol Company set off for its new location ('recced' in advance by Captain Burkitt) at **Piedimonte**, in the **Alife** area.

The platoons took up their allotted areas soon after breakfast, and the rest of the day was spent on vehicle maintenance and setting up camp. The nine trucks from 1 Platoon delivered their loads of wheat and flour to **Naples** and returned. Next day the Company was hard at work, carting MT 80 from the Petrol Depot at Casoria to a new dump, now being set up under the supervision of our Company's Sergeant Hamlin, as a petrol point to supply the New Zealand Division. Workshops busied themselves off-loading MT stores and reconditioned engine assemblies. The Company and its affiliated units had suffered heavy engine casualties during the move, so Workshops was required to estimate the number of engine replacements needed.

During the next few days, Petrol Company uplifted POL from Casoria and Torre del Greco for delivery to the Company dump. This was taken over, on 19 January, by Captain Butt and his group, who had returned from the **Sangro** the previous day after handing over there to **13 Corps**. The Company's transport details were reduced to a minimum to enable Workshops to concentrate on urgent vehicle repairs, and our drivers to catch up on maintenance.

The Company was now, with the rest of the Division, in the **Volturno** valley some 30 miles south of the **Gustav Line**. Here conditions were very much better than on the Adriatic sector, and life passed pleasantly

enough for a time in peaceful camps among olive groves and woodlands. Nearby was the picturesque town of **Piedimonte d' Alife**; beyond, the purple mountains. Though some rain fell, the air was losing its bite. Football began again; sightseeing parties visited **Pompeii**. Some assignments took Petrol Company drivers into **Naples**, which, though badly scarred by bombing, they found still buzzing with the normal daily life of a large maritime city. The *Luftwaffe* had paid particular attention to **Italy's** transport systems and Driver Feisst remarks in his diary: 'The railway yards are a real mess of twisted rails and trucks etc.... The waterfront area has been badly knocked about but the centre of the town is intact, and quite modern and clean.... The nearby villages are filthy, with garbage thrown into the streets—worse than the Wogs, actually, because better is expected of them.'

Features of life at this particular period were the frequent contacts and occasional close friendships with **United States** servicemen also encamped in the **Volturno** area. 'Roads busy with U.S. traffic', Driver Feisst notes on 19 January. 'The Yanks have about everything imaginable in equipment.' The Americans believed in waging war in comfort, and were generous with their goods and facilities. Hot showers, 'cawfee', 'seegars' and 'candy'—to say nothing of Lucky Strike cigarettes—were freely offered to our drivers when they called (as many did, especially around meal times) at one or another of these Allied camps.

Equally hospitable were the Italian civilians; but they, of course, were appallingly poor, and usually hopeful of making a gain. Pilfering by the civilian population, from army trucks and dumps, seemed almost as prevalent in **Italy** as it had been in the **Middle East**, and stringent measures were needed to counter it. Petty 'rackets'—and a few gross ones—were developed by some of the less scrupulous soldiery who had access to military stores or transport.

About this time, also, our drivers encountered the American traffic control system, which operated in the Fifth Army area. All convoys were given a serial number, based on a system of priorities, with a strict timetable to adhere to. The convoy commander would state how many

miles in the hour he could cover, and his schedule of movements was worked out accordingly. If he ran behind time, or ahead of it, the convoy would be pulled off the road at check points, placed near convenient parking areas.

‘It was’, Bill Washbourn remembers, ‘a most fantastic organisation, run, I believe, by a group of traffic experts from **New York**. At first we would not believe that it could work, after so many months of traffic shambles on the Adriatic Coast. But we soon learnt that the Americans did indeed have the gen on traffic control; and this eliminated all the frustrating business of overtaking, “tangled” convoys, and long enforced halts such as we had been used to.’

By 21 January the Division had assembled, and was awaiting the result of furious assaults then being made by Fifth Army against part of the **Gustav Line**. Our role was to reinforce success in any sector, and take part in the hoped-for drive upon **Rome**. But despite bitter fighting, and small gains made at heavy cost, there was no break-through. Before dawn on 22 January **6 United States Corps** landed behind the Germans at **Anzio**. It won a foothold but could not extend it.

On Sunday, 30 January, with our Division still ‘standing by’, the NZASC paraded before **General Freyberg** on a landing ground near HQ **2 NZ Division**. A total of 4200 attended, including 427 from Petrol Company, and the newly-formed NZASG Band. After inspecting the parade the GOC paid a tribute to the good work done by NZASG in all campaigns. A church service followed, then a march-past, after which the companies returned to their own areas. Next day, three football matches were played, in the course of an inter-platoon competition. Easier transport requirements, now that the Division was static, allowed more time for sport.

Early in February, while Fifth Army was striking hard but unsuccessfully against **Cassino**, a **New Zealand Corps** was formed with **Freyberg** in command. This comprised 4 Indian Division, our own division, an American armoured force (Combat Command ‘B’) and a

heavy concentration of British, Indian and American artillery units. A British division—the 78th—was also to join when required. Command of the New Zealand Division went to **Brigadier Kippenberger**; but unfortunately, while on a forward reconnaissance on 2 March, he stepped on a land mine and was seriously wounded. Brigadier **Parkinson**¹ took over.

The first task assigned to **New Zealand Corps** was the most difficult we had ever undertaken. This, in brief, was to capture the town of **Cassino**, the 1700-foot crag of **Montecassino**, and the famous Benedictine monastery, within the German defences, at its summit. For days **2 United States Corps** had hammered away at these objectives and had made small gains. On 12 February, **New Zealand Corps** took over the sector and three days later launched its first assault. This was combined with devastating air attacks on the Monastery itself, after the monks had been warned to leave and to take with them, or otherwise make secure, as much as they could of their art treasures, rare books, and famous manuscripts.

Despite heroic and costly efforts by Indian regiments to take the Monastery via steep ridges to the north-west, and equally valiant attempts by the New Zealanders, with an American armoured force under command, to cross the Rapido and Gari rivers south of the town, our Corps failed to take its major objectives and the attack was called off. Another, with the code-name **DICKENS**, was planned; but before it could be put into force rain set in and continued to fall day after day, filling the countless shell-holes and bomb-craters, and turning the surrounding plains into a muddy lagoon. Tanks, guns and transport became immobile, the bomber force was grounded, and any large-scale operations were impossible.

Petrol Company began its move into the **Cassino** area on 3 February, when Lieutenant Knyvett's Petrol Issuing Section was ordered forward to a proposed new Company location near **Presenzano**. A Corps FMC was to be set up there, with Supply, Petrol and the two Ammunition Companies

domiciled nearby. The new pipehead (petrol supplies at this stage were coming by pipeline from **Naples**) would then be at **Sparanise** and would fill tankers of 8 Mobile Petrol Filling Centre as from 5 February. The situation on 4 February was that the petrol point near **Alife** would refill 4 Indian Division's first and second line with POL (for 150 miles) on its arrival from the Adriatic sector and supply maintenance needs for the New Zealand Division. About 40,000 gallons of MT 80 would be required for this purpose daily. The **Alife** FMC was to continue supplying **New Zealand Corps** until all had assembled in the new area around **Mignano**; the new FMC near **Presenzano** would then maintain supply.

At noon on 4 February, HQ Command NZASC advised that the Division's move was delayed for one day, and that no further transport or commodities would be moved to the **Presenzano** area. The Company was also advised that its new location was in the zone occupied by **2 US Corps**, who seriously objected to any further concentration there. In the afternoon Major Forbes and Brigadier Crump made a 'recce' of the road on Route 6, as far as **Mignano**, with a view to siting a maintenance area along it; but the only suitable locations were occupied by units of **46 Division**. At nine o'clock that evening Company Headquarters received orders to supply 100 3-ton trucks next day to uplift 25-pounder ammunition from the BAD ² at **Nola**.

This instruction posed some problems. Nos. 1, 2 and 3 Platoons, with their Platoon Headquarters, were already established in the new **Presenzano** area. Their state was: No. 1 Platoon empty, No. 2 loaded with POL, No. 3 loaded with empty jerricans. Rain was now falling heavily there, and the new area was becoming a sea of mud. At **Alife**, No. 4 Platoon was loaded with empty jerricans, No. 5 with Derv. To comply with the new order, these loads would have to be quitted... but where? Captain Butt, seeking direction at HQ NZASC, got no clear answer. Eventually 2 and 3 Platoons dumped in the new FMC area, and No. 5 off-loaded in their own.

By 11.30 p.m. a detail had been arranged, and Company HQ awaited a movement order. This was received at 1.30 a.m. next day, and signals

were despatched at 1.45 to the platoons. They were instructed to leave **Alife** in four groups commencing at 8 a.m.; muddy conditions delayed departure from the **Presenzano** area, and 3 Platoon was two hours late.

With the ammunition finally loaded at **Nola**, the next question was what to do with it. The movement order gave no clue. Brigadier Crump advised that the north side of the road at **Presenzano** could not be used under any circumstances, and the existing ammunition dump at Taverna di Conca was not to be increased. An OCs' conference was ordered for 3 p.m. at HQ Command NZASC to discuss the whole S and T position; in the meantime a reconnaissance was to be made on the south side of the **Presenzano** area to find a suitable Company location and a site for the Mobile Petrol Filling Centre.

At the conference the Brigadier announced that our ammunition dump was in the centre of a brigade's assembly area, and the petrol dump was in the centre of **2 US Corps'** area. To solve the situation he ordered an area which the Petrol Company reconnaissance had discovered (south of Supply Company) to be used for ammunition; Petrol Company was to build an MPFC site on the south side of the road and use the existing dump for issues until exhausted. Petrol Company platoons were to return to the **Alife** area, and the ammunition loaded at **Nola** was to be delivered to 1 NZ Ammunition Company at **Alife**. No. 6 MPFC and one platoon of tankers (from 510 Tanker Company) was to operate as from 8 February at **Presenzano**, and 8 MPFC, with the balance of the tankers, at **Alife**.

During this period Workshops, whose vehicles had remained packed for the expected move, enjoyed a little leisure. No. 13 Section, however, pushed on with the building of a new map wagon for the GOC, the carpenters working until 8 p.m. and sometimes later. Welders from other Workshops sections carried out modifications to three Sherman tanks of a neighbouring British squadron.

On 8 February, Commander NZASC advised that an Indian pioneer labour unit numbering 350 was coming under command of **NZ Corps**,

and that fifty Indians would be allocated to each MPFC. That would boost the operations of the Filling Centres, and, with the machinery held by 8 MPFC, make possible a daily output of 40,000 gallons. Such an output would meet current requirements of the **New Zealand Corps** and enable the building up of a much-needed reserve. No. 510 Bulk Petrol Transport Company now had 30 tankers with 8 MPFC, and 21 with 6 MPFC. With the petrol pipehead at **Sparanise**, two trips per day could be made by each tanker.

Petrol Company moved on 9 February to its new location near **Presenzano**, and next day all drivers not on detail worked at road construction. Thirty trucks from No. 3 Platoon and six from No. 4 left to pick up mules at **Capua**, staging near that town for the night. Workshops found their location a very poor one, but settled down quickly to routine work. Heavy showers and a cold wind on 10 February made conditions most unpleasant for the whole Company, the terrain quickly becoming a quagmire. Next day badges and shoulder titles were resumed, fern leaves repainted on area signs and vehicles— a source of much satisfaction to all, since our soldiers were proud of their country and their Division, and always disliked having their identity clouded. On 11 February Captain **Frank**³ marched in, posted as OC Workshops Platoon.

March 1944 found Petrol Company still largely 'static' in the **Presenzano** area, and not specially pleased at their relative inactivity. Pipeline supply, of course, eliminated the laborious shuttling of convoys to and from railhead. At first, tankers drew petrol in bulk from the pipehead, then transferred their loads to 'mechanical cows' of the Mobile Petrol Filling Centres. These filled jerricans through sets of hoses, or 'octopi'.

In March the system changed to one of direct filling from the pipehead. This was effected by pressure nozzles coming from a 15,000-gallon surge tank. The point there had four heads, each with four nozzles, half the total number being used by the Americans, half by the

New Zealanders. Pressure at the nozzles was 60 lb to the square inch, the system necessitating a carpet of cans, arranged in rows, handy to the pipe. The carpet comprised 16 rows of 320 cans—a total of 5120. Filled cans were removed from the pipehead to the Petrol Company dump, and issued from there.

This system allowed our drivers much more spare time than usual, and the 'slack' was taken up in various ways—sport, marksmanship contests with rifle and Bren gun, the metalling of roads and platoon locations. But the period was a dull one; and the men 'let off steam' in their diaries and letters:

***1st March, 1944.* Still in the area without any move. Nothing much doing. Odd trucks have been out for metal and other jobs. Have been down to the Yankee showers a couple of times. Tonight a Jerry plane has been over and there were a couple of alerts on the siren in the village. There have been a couple of attacks up the **Cassino** front, but no progress has been made. On the **Anzio** front there has been much of attack and counter-attack. A number of chaps have gone to hospital with various complaints. Hope there is some movement soon.**

***14th March (Tues).* There has been very little happen since last writing-up, a fortnight ago. Have had three trips to Nafto Naples and Fertilio. It was a nice change to get away from the Platoon area. Also we've moved about four miles to an area on the **Cassino** road about 12 miles below **Cassino**. Moved last Sunday (12th). Area is quite pleasant under olive trees just over the rear vehicle line which is operating to **Mignano**. Yesterday was a beautiful day and today was pleasant. It seems as if the rainy spell is over and things may move forward again. The 'hanging around' has been very monotonous and trying—more so than work.**

Things did indeed begin to move again, the very next day; for D ICKENS, at last, was on. From 8.30 a.m. until midday on 15 March, wave upon wave of medium and heavy bombers plastered **Cassino, while 200 Warhawks, Invaders and Thunderbolts hammered enemy positions south**

and south-west of the town. German guns were attacked by Kittyhawks and **Boston** bombers of the **Desert Air Force**, while Lightnings and RAF Spitfires kept watch high above. ⁴

When, at noon, the aircraft 'switched off', the artillery opened up, with 610 guns firing 1200 tons of shells in less than four hours. Then in went the **New Zealand Corps** infantry, led by 25 Battalion. But such was the devastation caused by the bombing and shelling that our armour found their movements greatly hampered. Some tanks were bogged, others held up by immense masses of rubble. Some capsized over banks or slithered into craters; a number were knocked out by enemy fire. On the spurs and ridges Indian troops trying to reach the Monastery met a withering fire from mortars and machine guns.

Again and again the attack was pressed by New Zealand, Indian and British troops in a dour eight-day struggle. The Rapido was crossed, and most of **Cassino** taken. But so stubbornly did the enemy hold out on the slopes and round the fringes of the town that by 23 March it was obvious that any further gains would, be paid for far too dearly. The attack was called off. For the next week or two the New Zealanders held their ground in **Cassino**. Then they became involved in a general regrouping of the Allied armies in **Italy**. So, when **New Zealand Corps** was disbanded on 26 March, the Germans still held this road to **Rome**.

All through the period of activity 'up front' Petrol Company remained, in the doldrums, near **Mignano**. Only once did they take a direct hand in the game—on 18 February when the Maoris, who had captured the **Cassino** railway station the previous night, found themselves under observed fire from neighbouring hummocks and the slopes of **Montecassino**. Only a continuous smoke-screen could save the 28 Battalion men from serious trouble. But our artillery did not have enough shells to keep the smoke-screen going all day—and the nearest supplies were in a dump near the foot of Mount Vesuvius, 70 miles away.

Petrol Company's No. 1 and 3 Platoons were despatched, post-haste; and here we saw the value of the American traffic control. Our convoy

had not only a number but also an 'A' priority; and Captain Washbourn, trying to get his trucks out of the Company area on to Route 6, was soon joined by an American MP on a motor-cycle. Observing that ours was an 'A' convoy, the MP held up all other traffic until we got clear. Some time later, Washbourn was advised at one of the check-posts that we were not making the headway that we should.

The Americans offered a motor-cycle escort, and asked what our top speed would be. Washbourn replied, 'About 45 miles an hour—15 m.p.h. above army authorised speed'. We were then told to 'go to it'; and with the motor-cyclists whizzing ahead and policing all crossroads, we went 'flat out' for the ammunition dump. This was something our drivers had dreamed about—travelling at top to get an urgent job done, with no one to blame or abuse them for speeding.

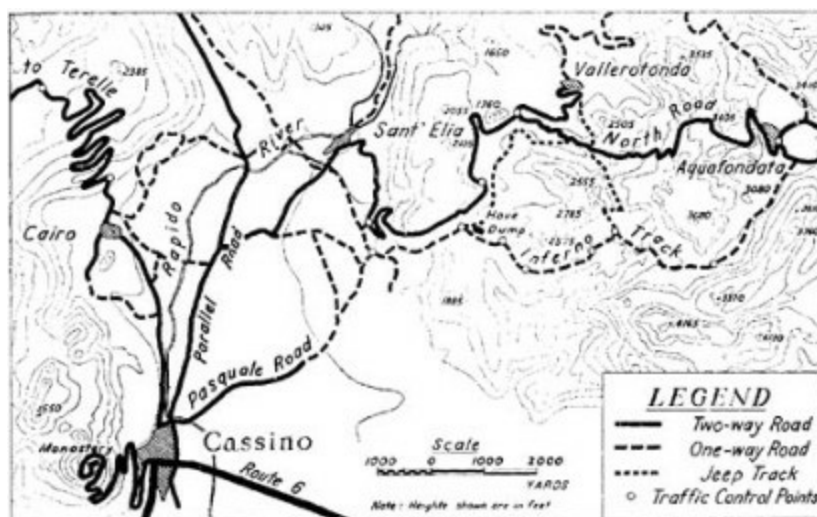
But such highlights, at this time, were rare. On 15 March another was provided by planes of the American Strategic and Tactical Air Forces as they zoomed over in tight formations, wave upon wave, throughout the morning. More than 500 medium and heavy bombers flew past—Fortresses, Liberators, Mitchells, Marauders—to drop a total load of over a thousand tons of bombs on **Cassino** and its surroundings. The town, badly damaged before, was now completely flattened; and from their vantage-point a few miles off, Petrol Company watched, fascinated, as a vast pillar of dust and smoke rose high into the air.

Four days later, more excitement came from a fire at the 1 NZ Ammunition Point, just across the road from Petrol Company's area. For five hours a vast conflagration raged, with explosion after explosion as 75-millimetre and 25-pounder shells went up, showering jagged lumps of metal, ammunition boxes, and shell cases over a wide area. This fire destroyed over a quarter of a million rounds of machine-gun ammunition and about 6500 rounds of heavy calibre stuff, besides trucks, tents, bivvies and men's personal gear, worth altogether about £48,000. Two soldiers of an American fire-fighting unit lost their lives, and another was badly wounded. Many Divisional Ammunition men showed great courage in trying to control the blaze, and in shifting trucks, stacks of

shells, and so on, out of danger. Brigadier Crump, while inspecting the scene, narrowly escaped having his head knocked off by a flying piece of jagged shell case.

Shrapnel and bullets flying from the exploding stacks prevented all movement along the road; and by 2 p.m. so much stuff was landing in the Petrol Company area that 5 Platoon, nearest to the road, was forced to move out. Some trucks suffered minor damage, and Driver **Corby**⁵ was wounded. Earlier in the month (10 March) Driver **McComb**⁶ received a fatal gunshot wound to the head. On the afternoon of 31 March Workshops' cookhouse caught fire, severely burning Driver **Way**,⁷ who was sent to hospital.

On 7 April survivors of the **5th Reinforcements** celebrated— with wine, and what passed for song—the anniversary of their sailing from New Zealand. Small groups returning from the Ruapehu furlough draft marched in; and on 13 April ('unlucky for some') five Petrol Company officers were listed for home leave under the Wakatipu scheme. They were: Captains F. G. Butt and R. K. **Davis**,⁸ Lieutenants E. T. C. **Sopp**,⁹ B. W. Roberts and L. M. Taylor. Four days later Major Forbes, who had left New Zealand with the First Echelon and had commanded Petrol Company since June 1941, left for Egypt to become OC, Base Training Depot, NZASC. Command of the Company then passed to Bill Washbourn, promoted temporary major on 18 April.



NEW ZEALAND SUPPLY ROUTES NORTH OF CASSINO

Early in April, the New Zealand Division regrouped with Eighth Army, coming (except for 4 Armoured Brigade, which went temporarily to 6 British Armoured Division) under command of **10 Corps**. The Division's role now was to defend part of the line across the Apennine Mountains. By the middle of the month most combat units had moved into mountain positions in the **Venafro- Isernia- Casale** triangle, above **Cassino**. Petrol Company moved, on 10 April, to a new position on Route 85, about six miles from **Isernia**, on the **Venafro** side.

Throughout the month troop-movements, by night, were continuous in this sector, as units were relieved and others took over. From the mountains enemy OPs kept approach roads under view and their guns trained on them, giving 'the works' to any Allied transport daring to move by day. Petrol Company shared in the night operations, taking the forward units into and out of the line—or as near as motor transport could approach it.

Acquafondata was then the closest point of safe approach for vehicles by day. This town was in an ancient volcanic crater whose basin became the assembly ground for a vast mass of troops and transport. Throughout the night, on a clockwork schedule, a succession of Jeep-trains—columns of loaded jeeps and trailers—took supplies forward to sheltered Jeep-heads. Thereafter all further movement was on foot, or by mulepack.

Two roads, both vile, squirmed westward among the mountains from **Acquafondata** to **Hove Dump**, our most forward supply and petrol point, about 13 miles away. These were the **North Road** and the well-named **Inferno Track**, along which Petrol Company convoys, carrying troops and POL, frequently ran the gauntlet by night. Enemy shelling lent speed to these detachments, or caused them to 'hole up' in riverbeds or quarries. On the night of 21-22 April Driver J. J. **Robertson**,¹⁰ of 5 Platoon, was killed by shellfire—Petrol Company's first fatality due to enemy action for almost a year, and their first in **Italy**.¹¹

Next night (22-23 April) was a specially lively one. No. 5 Platoon were shelled again while bringing out troops from **Hove Dump**, but all got back safely. At 4 p.m. eleven Petrol Company trucks under Captain G. W. Lyon and Second-Lieutenant F. W. Burt uplifted men of the 2788 RAF Squadron and delivered them, via the **Inferno Track**, to **Hove Dump**. No sooner had the trucks off-loaded than shelling began, killing and wounding a number of the airmen.

‘Several trucks were also set alight’, says Petrol Company’s war diary, ‘and as one of these was loaded with ammunition, it added considerably to the fireworks already in the area. The shelling was intermittent throughout the night but our men and vehicles escaped damage only by being parked under a cliff in dead ground. During the night Cpl L. R. **Burling**¹² did excellent work, driving trucks away from burning vehicles, putting out fires and attending to the wounded—all under heavy shellfire.’ For this Burling gained a mention in despatches.

On the return trip our trucks were to bring out men of 2771 Squadron. Some were late in making the rendezvous, so three three-tonners remained at HQ **5 NZ Infantry Brigade** to await them. The others took on airmen at 5 a.m. on 23 April, returning via the **Inferno Track**, since the **North Road** was then under heavy shellfire. Negotiating the steep and winding **Inferno Track**, without lights, was no picnic; but the convoy reached **Acquafondata** safely as day was breaking, then continued on with the **RAF** men to **Presenzano**. Meanwhile, Sergeant Davey brought out the three three-tonners left behind at 5 Brigade Headquarters, debussing the airmen on the **Venafro** road, where they were picked up by their own transport.

On 26 April Major Washbourn visited sick members of the Company in hospital at **Caserta**. He then went on to No. 4 Platoon, which was attached to **4 NZ Armoured Brigade**, recently withdrawn from the **Cassino** area and now resting at **Pietramelara**. Heavy rain that day made conditions very bad in the Company area, restricting the use of transport. A further tribulation for our men (though actually a blessing

in disguise) was the introduction of anti-malarial precautions. Sleeves had to be rolled down, and long trousers, with anklets, worn during and after the evening meal. These measures followed a series of lectures and routine orders stressing the need for special care over hygiene now that the Italian summer was approaching.

About this time Captain Lyon and his driver, Jack Brass,¹³ caught up on a neat little racket being run by a couple of men from another NZASC Company camped in the neighbourhood. From time to time they had noticed an army Bedford (of a type not then in use by the New Zealand Division) parked behind an old farmhouse some distance away. Our chaps decided to keep the truck under observation. They found that it went out at night and came back in the early hours of the morning. Obviously, the driver and his mate were up to no good, and this was reported to Field Security.

Next night, with an FSS man, Lyon and Brass investigated and found that the truck had a full load of grain on board; so they decided to hide up and follow in their jeep when the vehicle pulled out. Their quarry led them on an 85-mile jaunt to a little village near Naples. Not choosing to follow too closely, they lost sight of the truck when it entered the village, and, deciding that the others had given them the slip, they pulled up and boiled the billy—at about 2 a.m.—in the village square.

Just then the truck came clattering back into the square again, and the jeep gave chase. It overtook the other vehicle on a country road. Lyon and the FSS man drew their pistols, jumped out, and bailed the others up. One of the Kiwis in the truck (they had two Italian civilians with them also) tried to draw a revolver; but the FSS man thrust his pistol into the other's midriff and ordered: 'Drop it—or I'll drop you!'

At this moment both Italians made a bolt for it. Some shots were fired after them, and one man stopped; the other got clear. The three prisoners were handed over to the nearest provost headquarters—an American one—and eventually the whole story came out. The racketeers, it was found, had picked up an abandoned vehicle and managed to get it

mobile. Then, working for their Company by day, they drove on each alternate night right back to **Foggia**, where they picked up a load of grain. This was taken to the farmhouse and, on the following night, delivered at **Naples**. Each load netted them about 10,000 lire.

At the beginning of May, 4 Brigade was still resting at **Pietramelara**; 5 Brigade lay up in the **Volurno** valley; 6 Brigade held the **Terelle** sector in the **Apennines**, alongside other components of **10 Corps**. Second Polish Corps occupied the mountain approaches to **Monastery Hill** and **Cassino**; 13 British Corps faced **Cassino** and the **Liri** valley. South of the Liri River was the American Fifth Army, comprising 2 US Corps and the **French Expeditionary Corps**, mainly Algerian and Moroccan troops known to the soldiery as 'Goums'. Sixth United States Corps was consolidating at **Anzio**, while the British 5 Corps maintained a light hold on the Adriatic flank.

With their forces so disposed, the Allies were now planning an all-out attack on the Germans' **Gustav Line**. Eighth Army had in reserve a Canadian corps, whose 11 Infantry Brigade came for a time under New Zealand command. In the final reshuffle this unit was replaced by 12 South African Motor Brigade.

On 1 May Petrol Company took over the Hove and Brighton dumps from the Canadians, replenishing the former under shellfire. Five days later, 24 three-tonners from No. 2 Platoon, and nine from No. 3, picked up troops of the Canadian Irish Regiment and moved them back to the **Capua** area. On 7 May Major G. G. **Good**¹⁴ marched in, taking over command from Bill Washbourn, who reverted to the rank of captain and resumed his former duties as second-in-command of the Company, with additional ones as Petrol Officer. That day Hove Dump was destroyed by enemy shelling, so **Venafro** and **Acquafondata** became the main forward supply points for troops in this sector.

For the whole of May Petrol Company (less 4 Platoon still with 4 Armoured Brigade) remained near **Isernia** on routine duties. These consisted mainly of replenishing the Petrol Issuing Sections and the

Brighton Dump, with occasional assignments to cart troops, salvage and ordnance stores. An outstanding event was a visit from New Zealand's Prime Minister, the Rt. Hon. Peter Fraser, on 30 May, when the whole Company paraded at 1 NZ Supply Company's area. That night the Company's officers attended an NZASC dinner given for Mr Fraser at 2 NZ Field Bakery.

Meanwhile a climax was developing in Italy. On 11 May, shortly before midnight, the Allies launched a massive two-army attack on the Gustav Line. The New Zealanders (still mostly on the sideline) watched amazed while to their left a thousand guns in the 2 Polish and 13 British Corps' sectors alone lit the sky with a myriad stabs and flashes, closely followed by the crump, crump, crump of exploding shells. New Zealand artillery gave support to the Poles in an attack upon the Monastery. On 14 May 19 NZ Armoured Regiment moved its tanks across the Gari River in support of 4 British Division in the Liri valley. For the next few days our armour, followed by British infantry, carried out a left hook to cut Route 6, the enemy's main line of withdrawal from Cassino.

On 18 May Cassino itself was assaulted. But the Germans, by then, had already pulled out. The remnants of this town, once so bitterly contested, and at such cost, fell without a struggle.

The Poles, in their first attack on the Monastery, met a stubborn resistance which held them up. But swiftly the 'Goums', on Fifth Army front, surged across the Aurunci Mountains and entered the Liri valley. Thus faced with encirclement the German forces began to withdraw. And so, on 18 May, when the Poles attacked again up Monastery Hill, they took their objective, and Allied flags fluttered over the mountain.

So fell the stubborn Cassino barrier, which for eight months had blocked our road to Rome. The enemy now was in full retreat, with vast Allied forces preparing to pursue him up the peninsula of Italy.

¹ **Maj-Gen G. B. Parkinson, CBE, DSO and bar, m.i.d., Legion of Merit (US); Christchurch; born Wellington, 5 Nov 1986; Regular**

solider; NZ Fd Arty 1917-19; CO 4 Fd Regt Jan 1940-Aug 1941; comd 1 NZ Army Tank Bde and 7 Inf Bde Gp (in NZ) 1941-42; 6 Bde Aug 1944-Jun 1944; GOC 2 NZ Div 3-27 Mar 1944; CRA 2 NZ Div Jun-Aug 1944; comd 6 Bde Aug 1944-Jun 1945; NZ Military Liaison Officer, London, 1946-49; Commander, Southern Military District, 1949-51.

² Base Ammunition Depot.

³ Maj J. J. Frank, m.i.d.; Eastbourne, Wellington; born Timaru, 9 Jan 1920; motor mechanic.

⁴ One American plane 'laid an egg' near our lines, splintering a 2 Platoon truck. Other bombs fell near the village of Venafro, causing casualties among civilians and Allied troops. Alongside one huge crater there, a Kiwi put up a signboard: 'Precision bombing. Cassino 17 miles?'; for at that time there was much talk of a new American bombsight, by which they could 'drop a bomb into a barrel'.

⁵ Dvr L. Corby: Hastings; born NZ 25 May 1918; orchard and farm labourer; wounded 19 Mar 1944.

⁶ Dvr J. McComb; born NZ 9 Sep 1912; shearer; died on active service 10 Mar 1944.

⁷ Dvr R. V. Way; born NZ 22 Sep 1907; builder.

⁸ Maj R. K. Davis, m.i.d.; Melbourne; born Auckland, 2 Mar 1917; clerk.

⁹ Lt E. T. C. Sopp; born NZ 8 Nov 1909; motor salesman; killed in accident 12 Feb 1949.

¹⁰ Dvr J. J. Robertson; born Maheno, 7 Apr 1916; farmhand; killed in action 21 Apr 1944.

¹¹ **Bill Washbourn** writes: ‘For thirteen consecutive nights Petrol Company trucks went into **Hove Dump**.... There were three roads used—one was a road that ran parallel to Highway 6 where they could go only so far before dark, and it was whilst waiting on this road for darkness to come that No. 5 Platoon was shelled and Driver Robertson killed. The second road was the one that was available to jeeps and used in both directions. The third road was the one that the trucks used to come out of by night because it was absolutely essential to be off it at daylight, since it faced the enemy and the whole of it was under gunfire. I did a reconnaissance of this road during daylight hours in a jeep, and reported back to the Brigadier that it would be possible to be used by three-tonners at night. From memory there were 29 corners in this road, and at many of them trucks could not get round in one turn, but had to back and fill. When we started the trucks off, loaded with troops (which they always carried from **Hove Dump**) it was approximately half-an-hour before we could hear them going round a corner directly above us. The only thing to guide the drivers was a narrow white tape on these corners, and most times the spare driver either stood on the bumper-bar guiding the driver, or walked in front with a white towel on his back. During the whole of this job we did not have one accident nor had any driver ever been over this road in daylight—perhaps just as well. After the fall of **Cassino** I deliberately took No. 3 Platoon over this route one day and they were absolutely aghast to see where they had been driving. Personally I feel that this was one of the greatest exhibitions of driving ever given by the Company, and their job was more onerous because they were carrying troops, not just empty trucks or supplies.’ (Letter to the author.)

¹² **Cpl L. R. H. B. Burling**, m.i.d.; Woodville; born **Palmerston North**, 28 Sep 1907; shepherd; wounded 10 Dec 1944.

¹³ **Dvr J. R. Brass**; Otautau; born Southland, 22 Jan 1920; shearer.

¹⁴ **Maj G. G. Good**, OBE, m.i.d.; Salisbury, Southern Rhodesia; born **NSW**, 14 Nov 1913; dental mechanic; OC 6 RMT Coy Feb 1942-Sep 1943; NZASC Base Trg Depot Sep 1943-Apr 1944; Pet

Coy May-Jul 1944.

PETROL COMPANY

CHAPTER 17 – CLEAN-UP IN ITALY

CHAPTER 17

Clean-up in Italy

, like **Alamein**, carried the Allies a distinct stage nearer to final victory. Like **Alamein**, it led to the clearance of an entire theatre of war. Like **Alamein** it was followed by the long pursuit of a dour and stubborn enemy—battered, bleeding, but still full of fight.

Our Division joined the pursuit, clashing with enemy rearguards, meeting heavy harassing fire, dealing with mines and demolitions. Towards the end of May, 5 and 6 Brigades, transported by 4 and 6 RMT Companies, joined forces at **Atina**, where Divisional Petrol Company opened a petrol point to supply them. The Company, meantime, had moved its Headquarters to Sant' Elia, on the **North Road** beyond Hove Dump, where another petrol point was established. On 2 June the **Atina** point was shelled, causing no casualties to Petrol Company, but holding up the delivery of POL there by No. 1 Platoon. That day, Company Headquarters and Workshops moved again, to a new location across the Melfa River.

This area, in paddocks along the **Atina- Sora** road, was flanked by wide, deep ditches, giving little space for dispersal. Quite a mass of transport, including that of Divisional Supply Company, had concentrated there; and by midday some Jerry 88-millimetre guns got our range. The shelling was accurate and persistent; so Major Good ordered the Company to quit this area and occupy another some four or five miles farther back. In the shemuzzle, a Workshops 15-cwt was peppered with shrapnel, and Drivers **Pope**, ¹ **Davis** ² and Sims were wounded.

Pope and **Davis** 'got theirs' first, while seeking cover in some woods along a river-bank. **Sims** noticed their plight, and hastened to ASC Headquarters for an ambulance. While he was



ITALY MAP No.2

returning in this vehicle, a shell landed alongside, doing no damage at all to the ambulance, but sending a metal fragment through the open window to lop the top off one finger and injure another. Sims had his hand on his knee at the time, and that, he believes, saved his knee-cap. The ambulance picked up Pope and Davis, taking them to an MDS. Sims had his fingers patched by New Zealand nursing sisters at a medical station—only a few miles from the battle scene.

Around midday on 3 June, sixty-five shells lobbed into the **Atina** petrol point area in the space of an hour and a half, damaging eight Petrol Company vehicles, and setting fire to one, which received a direct hit. Captain Washbourn was wounded in the leg, but after treatment at the MDS was able to resume duty; Jerry Lyon, also, was grazed by a splinter. About 500 gallons of petrol went up. Divisional Supply records the loss of a stack of spam, in the same raid, by a direct hit. 'That', says their official history, 'was a most useful shell; many a stock deficiency was written off against it.' ³

It is said that a soldier never sees the shell which 'gets' him; but several Petrol Company men have testified to seeing the one which wounded Washbourn and Lyon. They could not only hear it coming, they say, but could see it quite clearly as it waffled through the air at the extreme end of its range. Dan **Munro**, ⁴ Lieutenant Perkins's ⁵ driver,

had thoughtfully laid out his officer's bedroll to air in the afternoon sun. The blankets were riddled with shrapnel. 'Something always happens when I put your bedding out', grumbled Dan. And he refused ever to air that bedroll again.

Both companies advanced next day to **Alvito**, where Petrol Company had as neighbours 22 NZ (Motor) Battalion whose task then was to protect the Divisional axis road. Soon after the Company moved in, our tanks and artillery opened up against enemy observation posts on the ridge above; but despite some retaliation, no shells landed in Petrol Company's area. The petrol points at **Atina** and Sant' Elia were closed and a new one opened at **Alvito**. By evening Company Headquarters, Workshops, and most of the operating platoons had concentrated there. Heavy rain and a terrific thunderstorm, with hail the size of pigeons' eggs, made the movement difficult, and 4 Platoon were unable to get into their area. They returned to **Atina** for the night. Most of Workshops settled in before the rain commenced; but some trucks, arriving late, were bogged down when trying to negotiate the entrance, and had to stay there overnight. Winches hauled them out in the morning.

On 4 June **Rome** fell; and, two days later, the world received electrifying news: the long-awaited 'Second Front' had at last been opened, with Allied landings under General Eisenhower on the coast of Northern France. Assuredly, now, we were moving towards the end; and although predictions of 'victory by Christmas' were still to prove illusory, morale was on the 'up and up' with the final goal now definitely in sight. Adding to our elation came the heady pleasures of an Italian summer, with sunshine warming the air and the spirits, and wildflowers, ripening corn, leafy vineyards, and colourful groves of cherry, olives and flowering almonds lending charm to a picturesque countryside.

But in this paradise, man still was vile—still pursuing man with fire and sword—killing, maiming, destroying—counting it a virtue to suffer and inflict suffering. One pitiful by-product was a mass of refugees—women and children, the weak, the aged, the infirm—now cluttering all the roads. The Germans were accused of turning these hapless people

loose to hamper our advance; and New Zealand trucks were kept busy moving them from the roadways to camps and depots farther back. On 5 June, and again on the 7th, Petrol Company vehicles carried refugees from **Sora** to **Venafro**; others during this period carted POL from **Venafro** and **Atina** to the **Alvito** petrol point. Workshops had a busy time replacing motors with such spares as they had on hand, these falling short of the number required owing to the many engine 'casualties' sustained by the Company in its recent heavy slogging among the mountains.

On 8 June our vehicles came under command of **10 Corps** for use as third-line transport, the platoons reporting to **CRASC 10 Corps** at **Venafro**. Five days later Company HQ moved to an area a little beyond **Arce**, on Route 6. Hereabouts, in the beautiful **Liri** valley, the Division was now resting, all German forces having, with some persuasion, vacated the neighbourhood. New Zealand battalions, **Divisional Cavalry** and artillery units had pursued the Germans as far as **Avezzano**, occupied by troops of 6 Brigade on 9 June. Thereafter the whole Division withdrew to **Arce** for its first complete rest since it started fighting in **Italy**. Our company ran a petrol point in this area, replenishing from **Cassino**.

This, and a variety of general carrying assignments, kept the Company busy until 19 June, when it moved to a new location nine miles south of **Rome**. Ten three-tonners of 5 Platoon remained at **Arce** to maintain the petrol point; the rest of the company, plus two platoons of **Divisional Supply Company**, then worked for ten days carting ammunition from No. 3 AAD to ARH ⁶ at **Narni**, under orders from Eighth Army. Thereafter, until the Company resumed its normal role on 7 July, the main task was moving ammunition from **Anzio** to **Narni**.

By now our combat troops were nearing the end of their few weeks' 'vacation' (which included leave for many to **Rome**, **Naples**, and the beautiful island of **Ischia**) and the Division was scheduled to join Eighth Army's advance to the River **Arno**, some 300 miles farther north. The

Allies aimed at hustling the enemy and denying him time to strengthen his hold on the **Gothic Line**—his next great barricade, which stretched across **Italy** from Massa near the Gulf of Genoa to **Pesaro** on the Adriatic. South of **Florence**, a series of wooded peaks and ridges served as a screen for that sector of the Gothic Line. Our Division's task was to help clear these high-country positions so that 6 British Armoured Division and the Brigade of Guards could move forward through **Arezzo** to the River **Arno**, preparatory to an assault on the **Gothic Line** proper.

Petrol Company moved from its area near **Rome** at 1 p.m. on 8 July, staging at **Civita Castellana** and **Perugia**. The Company travelled fully loaded, opening petrol points for the Division as it passed through. This move was highly secret, with the brigades travelling by night and all identifying emblems obliterated. By 13 July the Company had made camp at Camucia, in the **Cortona** area, not far from Lake Trasimene. That day our Division again went into action, and 6 Brigade occupied two of the mountain positions. Others were contested for a day or two; but a set-piece attack on the **Lignano** feature removed all doubts, and by 16 July the enemy had pulled back and Eighth Army held **Arezzo**.

Meanwhile our Company stayed at Camucia, now the Division's main POL supply point. On 16 July details were announced of another furlough scheme—**Taupo**—for 4th Reinforcements and remaining officers of the original Echelons. The only Petrol Company officer affected was the new OC, Major Good; and Bill Washbourn, with the substantive rank of major, was appointed to command the Company. Captain G. W. Lyon, one of the Company's 'originals', succeeded him as Divisional Petrol Officer. The Company also lost, on 20 July, its very popular Captain Sam Burkitt, posted to HQ Command NZASC as Divisional Troops Supply Officer.

Next day Company Headquarters stood by, awaiting orders to move westward to an area near **Siena**. While twenty load-carriers from 5 Platoon took POL forward to a new petrol point there, twenty-five trucks of 1 Platoon, plus one from No. 4 and four from No. 5, transported troops of 24 Battalion to a position north of the city, completing the

assignment by 8.30 p.m. Nos. 2 and 3 Platoons were also detached to 6 Brigade for troop-carrying, reporting to Brigade Headquarters at 5 p.m., then staging for the night after being detailed to the infantry companies. Trucks of No. 4 Platoon and the balance of No. 5 engaged on routine duties, carting POL. Workshops received ten Dodge three-tonners from New Zealand Ordnance Field Park, the first instalment of thirty replacement vehicles for the Company.

July the 22nd was a particularly busy day, with all hands working far into the night to build up stocks at the **Siena** petrol point. The detached platoons, after finishing their troop-carrying, also piled in, driving for long hours in oppressive heat with scant time for meals or rest, over roads six inches thick with dust. That day the New Zealand Division, which had been in reserve since 16 July, took over from a French-Moroccan division, and 5 Brigade, supported by our tanks, began a thrust north-east towards **San Casciano**. Slowly the enemy drew back, and New Zealanders entered the town on 27 July. That night, from their hilltop positions, they could see the lights of **Florence** (which had been declared an open city) only ten miles away.

Our next objective was the so-called **Paula Line**, based on a curving string of hills around **Florence**. With **8 Indian Division** on their left flank and **6 South African Armoured Division** on their right, the New Zealanders advanced, encountering stubborn resistance, heavy shelling, and sharp counter-attacks. Particularly fierce fighting raged around the village of San Michele, built on a hilltop, and a keypoint in the advance; but after a crushing barrage from the Divisional Artillery, our troops took the village on 30 July. Thrusts by the New Zealanders against other objectives were also successful, despite tenacious resistance; and slowly, spasmodically, the advance continued. By 3 August we had pierced the **Paula Line** and opened the road to **Florence**.

While the Division was notching these further successes, Petrol Company had been occupied with troop-carrying, carting ammunition, and the normal business of operating and replenishing the petrol point.

Nearly 800,000 gallons of liquid fuels were issued by the Company in July. On 3 August Nos. 1 and 2 Platoons carried infantry of 23 and 24 Battalions forward to a position on Highway 2, about six miles south of **Florence**. Early next morning South African troops entered the city, followed some hours later by a New Zealand column, including four platoons of 23 Battalion—and, of course, a number of Petrol Company drivers. All received a tumultuous welcome from the wildly excited civilian population, with flowers, embraces, and other gestures of friendship the order of the day.

That morning Divisional Petrol Company moved their headquarters to an area beside the petrol point on Route 2, about one kilometre north of Bargino. Troop-carrying continued for the next few days, while our Division handed over in this sector to the Canadians, then moved farther west to relieve **8 Indian Division**. While the brigades ‘mopped up’ along the south bank of the **Arno**, Petrol Company enjoyed a comparatively restful few days in pleasant surroundings among orchards and vineyards. Then, on 14 August it was ‘up sticks’ again for a move back to **Siena**, where the Company opened a petrol point on the exact spot they had occupied before.

While some Petrol Company platoons were making this move, others engaged in further troop-carrying as American troops of Fifth Army took over from the New Zealand Division. By 16 August the change-over was completed and our Division withdrew to an assembly area near **Castellina**, some 30 miles south of **Florence**. They were visited there, on 24 August, by the dynamic Winston Churchill, who drove past the Company area at midday, cigar in mouth and giving his celebrated Victory sign.

Since the middle of August Petrol Company drivers had been working night and day, covering tremendous mileages in oppressive heat and dust, though often enough on good tarsealed roads and through pleasant country. The two RMT Companies worked on a similar non-stop programme, covering during August an aggregate of over a million miles. Our own Company and its affiliated units travelled half-a-million miles.

Much of the work was collecting ammunition from partly-used dumps scattered over a wide area, and moving it across to Iesi, near the Adriatic. Large quantities of POL were also moved there, and to the intermediate points of Foligno and Chiaravalle, to replenish the Division on its next big move.

This was part of the Allied plan to switch Eighth Army, swiftly and secretly, right across Italy, and, using its now immense strength and striking power, to break through the Germans' Gothic Line on the Adriatic flank. Here (as elsewhere) the line was formidable, with defences to a depth of 30 miles, among low hills and a network of canals. At 11 p.m. on 25 August, Eighth Army, which now had ten divisions, 1000 guns and 1200 tanks, launched its attack. The New Zealand Division arrived a few days later, and, except for the artillery and a small composite force sent forward to help 3 Greek Mountain Brigade, went into reserve. It formed part of 1 Canadian Corps at this time. For a short while our men relaxed near the picturesque coast.

By the beginning of September, Petrol Company had settled down near Chiaravalle ('Clear Valley') about four miles from the coast, on the road to Iesi. Life here passed pleasantly enough (except for an isolated bombing raid, which caused no damage), with the pressure of work considerably eased, and with time and facilities for recreation. Two trucks ran a shuttle service to good bathing beaches near Ancona; football matches took place between the ASC companies; the Kiwi Concert Party entertained; the NZASC Band gave concerts and led the hymns at church services, again being held by Padre Holland.

There was some fraternising with the local folk—who seemed very friendly and hospitable—until Security discovered the presence of enemy agents and all local visiting was banned. Forbidden, too, was the use of army transport for civilian purposes—an order made necessary by the fact that the movement of produce in Italy then, for other than military purposes, had virtually ceased; and fat profits could be gained (as we saw in the last chapter) by the simple process of shifting grain, wine, oil and

other foodstuffs from points of supply, which were plentiful enough, to equally numerous points of demand. And the use of an army truck for an hour or two, preferably by night, brought its reward in wads of lire—or other favours.

In the way of work there was the usual business of running and replenishing petrol points—including a forward one for the artillery at Soltara—carting stores and reinforcements, and moving Greek troops now attached to our Division. Workshops had the unenviable job of patching up our run-down transport, drawing and issuing replacement vehicles (especially for 1 Platoon, now virtually immobile because of worn-out engines) and undertaking various tasks in the way of fitting and body-building. These included repairs to the GOC's map truck and the reconstruction of the Company's RAP vehicle. Technicians from No. 13 Section were detached to HQ 2 NZ Division for the fitting of engines to stationary vehicles. From New Zealand Ordnance Field Park, MT spares were uplifted and distributed to NZASC units.

On 6 September Captain M. G. Browne and Lieutenant W. E. Baldwin marched in on return from furlough in New Zealand and were posted to Nos. 2 and 1 Platoons respectively. By next day most of the Company had concentrated in a new area near Mondolfo. On the run up, some of our drivers noticed a number of one-man submarines in a small cove which had obviously been used by Jerry as a minor naval base. On 11 September a New Zealand group comprising three artillery field regiments, 2 NZ Divisional Artillery Headquarters, and one company of a Field Ambulance unit moved up north of Pesaro to take part in the battle for Rimini, and next day Petrol Company trucks began taking POL forward to Cattolica to supply them. That week the whole Company moved to an area on the coast near Cattolica, where summer kit was handed in and winter clothing issued. We were also given an extra blanket, making the issue four per man. On 20 September came the welcome news that the remainder of the 4th Reinforcements were to rendezvous at 1 NZ Supply Company next day on the first stage of their return journey home to New Zealand. Petrol Company's total comprised

6 NCOs and 15 drivers.

Meanwhile 5 and 6 Brigades had also moved forward to **Cattolica**, where troops were amazed to see, on the night of 17–18 September, the sky above **Rimini** suddenly lit up by sixteen searchlights on fixed direction. They threw over the battlefield a weird light which dazzled the enemy and revealed their positions. So successful did this practice prove that it was continued night after night, some lights focusing on low clouds, for the sake of the reflection, others on the target areas for infantry or artillery attack. Petrol Company drivers found the illumination useful when travelling in forward areas without the use of headlights.

By now Eighth Army had fought its way over the San Fortunato ridge, last barrier before **Rimini** and the surrounding plains with their network of canals and irrigation ditches. Fifth Brigade went in, on 22 September, for a daylight attack on tough German paratroops holding the coastal road to **Ravenna**. By next day the New Zealanders had driven the enemy four miles past **Rimini**, advancing along both sides of the highway. Sixth Brigade also came forward from **Cattolica** (carried, like the 5th, by our RMT vehicles) to relieve 5 Brigade and carry on the advance. For other New Zealand units a leave scheme commenced on 22 September, allowing six days at the New Zealand Forces Club in **Florence**, and one day each way for travelling.

Petrol Company remained throughout October with its Headquarters at **Cattolica**, No. 1 Petrol Issuing Section at **Cerreto**, and No. 2 at **Viserba**, three miles north of **Rimini**. Rain and heavy gales—a miserable foretaste of winter—bogged down the fighting forces and slowed up our advance. When the sun came out again the New Zealanders inched forward, reaching their farthest line of advance—the River Savio—towards the end of the month. Our combat troops were then withdrawn and sent back to **Fabriano** for a rest.

Shortly after the fall of **Rimini**, Petrol Company's Fred Aickin found himself in the city with a jeep, a sergeant, and a driver, seeking

comforts, he says, for the officers' mess. Carpets, armchairs, crockery and other accessories were gathered up and piled into the jeep—to the deep disapproval of a Tommy provost patrol, which appeared (as they so often did) at an inconvenient moment.

Our officer was invited to go along to Provost Headquarters in their vehicle, with our jeep following. En route, the Kiwi driver lost no time in ditching the bulkier items of his load. But, by chance, the provost driver took a wrong turning, and, to regain his route, traversed the very street where the jettisoned cargo still lay! This, however, went unobserved; and our party arrived at Provost Headquarters with nothing but a gay umbrella, a little crockery and a few glasses by way of evidence. The Petrol Company trio were sent on their way, though later Fred got a 'please explain' from Corps Headquarters.

At Viserba, Corporal Sampson ⁷ established his Petrol Issuing Section in the railway yards, his office being a railroad wagon. Mark Knyvett and Jerry Lyon also found themselves railway billets, in the home of the stationmaster at Rimini. Their stay was marred by the disappearance of one of the family turkeys, which the wife used to count both night and morning. And when one bird failed to answer the roll call (being, presumably, AWL) a dark cloud of suspicion settled upon our officers, who were—believe it or not—entirely innocent.

Knyvett soon noticed that the daughter of the house—a handsome wench of about 18 or 19—harboured romantic notions concerning his driver. But the youth was coy, and kept his distance. And although both Mark and Jerry were discreetly encouraging, the affair failed to spark; and poor Dorselina has no doubt died of a broken heart.

The officers had as their right-hand man Sergeant Hori Perston, who, like most Maoris, wrote a beautiful hand and kept most neat and accurate records. Hori quickly mastered Italian; and this, with his jovial disposition, always favourably impressed the locals, thus smoothing the path for many transactions, official and otherwise, which soldiers in a foreign land must make with the local civilians.

On 25 October Petrol Company Headquarters moved a short distance to a more comfortable area where all ranks were billeted in *casas*. That day No. 2 Petrol Issuing Section left **Viserba**, opening for business three days later at Castel Raimondo. Earlier in the month 'Maurie' Browne and Second-Lieutenant **Chamberlain**,⁸ with eighty Petrol Company drivers, spent an eventful week as part of a 150-man detail, ferrying vehicles for Eighth Army 'from **Capua** to **Foligno** and further', as Browne's report describes it.

Even more eventful—and more entertaining—was an expedition to move a Cypriot Pack Transport Company, complete with mules, immediately afterwards. Captain Lyon writes:

On Saturday 14 October 1944 a signal was received ordering us to provide 100 × 3 ton vehicles to uplift the 621 Cypriot Pack Transport Company and transport them to Bagno, ref: road map **Italy** 1: 200,000 R3674. Transport was made up as follows:—

| | |
|----------------------|--|
| No 1 Platoon | 20 × 3 ton commanded by Lt Baldwin |
| No 2 Platoon | 27 × 3 ton commanded by Capt Browne |
| No 3 Platoon | 29 × 3 ton commanded by Lt Templeton |
| No 4 Platoon | 29 × 3 ton commanded by 2/Lt Chamberlain |
| Total 105 (5 spares) | |

Capt Lyon commanded the convoy.

Transport left Unit lines at 0700 hours 15 October 1944 for the 621 Coy HQ at R639894 which is just south of Sogliano, a small, picturesque, typically Italian town perched on a hillside.

Owing to the urgent nature of the detail, the route in to this hilly country had not been reced, and some difficulty was experienced in locating detours to avoid blown-out bridges, and from all accounts, some very circuitous trails were followed, but by 1400 hours all vehicles were at their destination.

Loading was commenced in so far as stores were concerned, but it was decided not to load the animals until the following morning just

prior to departure. A convenient site was located and at 0600 hours on the 16th October 1944 the loading of mules and horses was commenced. The Cypriot muleteers undoubtedly show great aptitude for handling these contrary little beasts and when the organisation got into full swing it was possible to load a troop of mules (approximately 100) in $\frac{3}{4}$ of an hour.

The convoy was split into four groups as follows:—

| | |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| HQ, 'B' Echelon and Stores | — No 1 Platoon (no animals) |
| B Troop | — No 2 Platoon |
| C Troop | — No 4 Platoon |
| D Troop | — No 3 Platoon |

In passing it is interesting to note that a troop in a Mule Pack Company has a similar organization to that of a Platoon in a General Transport Company, having its own cooks, QM etc., and being quite self-contained. No 2 Platoon carrying B Troop were loaded first and left immediately in order to avoid undue congestion, this at 0715 hours. Other Platoons were loaded in slightly better time than this as the day was growing lighter and the organization functioned more perfectly. An unhappy incident occurred when a muleteer and his two mules were blown to pieces on a mine just off the road, but apart from this, the operation was carried out without a hitch.

It being necessary to water the animals at the noon halt, we decided to stage at Jesi in a convenient river bed which allowed plenty of room for this operation. The route followed to Jesi was Lincoln Road to Rimini thence routes 16 and 76. After the noon halt, we proceeded to Foligno on route 16 and the convoy was complete at the Car Park Foligno (an ideal staging area) at 2300 hours, 16 October 1944. The animals were not unloaded here, but were fed, and watered from our watercarts.

An early start was made from Foligno on 17 October 1944 and we wheeled out from there at 0630 hours following Route 75 to Lake Trasimene, where on a small road skirting the North shore of the Lake, the animals were again 'refuelled'.

We then commenced the final stage of the journey, which was on Route 75 to **Arezzo** and thence Route 71 to Bagno, our destination. Two hold-ups occurred to allow General Alexander to pass. He was in the familiar yellow open Humber car, and huddled up in a furlined jerkin did not appear to be enjoying the unkind attentions of the elements. We had decided to halt at **Arezzo** for lunch, but as the road was reasonably clear at this point (previously it had been jammed for miles by a slow-moving Polish formation) it was decided to carry on to Bagno without stopping.

Despite traffic, and a 4000 foot climb over a mountain, the convoy was complete in Bagno at 1800 hours without a single mishap over the 250 mile journey from the starting point.

Considerable difficulty was experienced in off-loading as heavy rain set in and it was impossible to get the vehicles off the road. This was overcome by parking them up a road which was being used as a Polish Ammunition Dump. The Officer in charge became rather concerned but fortunately could speak very little English, and beyond beating his chest and making little jumps up and down, could not achieve any far-reaching result.

The nearest bank suitable for off-loading was some two miles from this staging area, and there the vehicles were off-loaded, the mules showing extreme willingness to set their feet (sorry, hooves) on firm ground again. At 2130 hours all except the stores vehicles had been off-loaded and the drivers, who had 'had' the mules by this time, refuelled their vehicles and turned-in for some well-earned rest.

Nos 2, 3 and 4 Platoons left Bagno on the homeward trip at 0600 hours on 18 October 1944. No 1 Platoon (and 7 × 3 ton of No 3 Platoon) remained behind to off-load and follow on as soon as their loads were cleared. The climb over the mountain was very impressive at that early hour and as the vehicles wound up the zigzag road to the summit a fleecy vista of clouds far below made an inspiring sight.

The platoons reassembled at **Foligno** except for the above-mentioned

stores vehicles, and after an excellent meal from their respective cookhouses, left **Foligno** in the vicinity of 1500 hours to complete the homeward trip. Most vehicles were back in Unit lines by midnight 18/19 October, and the remainder arrived at 1400 hours 19 October 1944.

It is worthy of note that the distance 'as the crow flies' from the starting point to the ultimate destination is approximately 15 miles, but, due to the tactical situation and other factors, it was necessary to do a 250 mile, two-day trip to effect this move—such is warfare in **Italy**.

In the closing days of October and the opening ones of November, NZASC underwent a drastic reorganisation. The Division, it was found, had become over-mechanised. An entire Company— **6 RMT**—was 'washed up', its more serviceable vehicles being swapped, before it disbanded, for the riff-raff and write-offs of other units. The 18th NZ Tank Transporter Company also went, as did Petrol Company's No. 1 Platoon, which ceased to operate on 30 October and was officially disbanded on 5 November.

On that day, Lieutenant W. E. Baldwin and seventy other ranks from Petrol Company marched out at 7 a.m. to New Zealand Advanced Base, **Bari**. With them went 334 men of the now defunct **6 RMT**, 73 from 1 NZ Ammunition Company, eight from 1 NZ Supply Company and five from 2 NZ Ammunition Company. All piled into vehicles of Petrol Company's former No. 5 Platoon, which became No. 1 in the new establishment. The demise of **6 RMT** Company, which had played an honourable and often hazardous part in many campaigns, carrying our combat troops into and out of battle, was a sad thing. Even more regrettable was the fate of its drivers—hard-bitten veterans who had kept their vehicles rolling through the haze, heat and sand of limitless deserts, in mountain blizzard and through seas of mud, often under enemy fire. For them anti-climax lay ahead—the tedium of guards and pickets; parades, inspections, the bull-ring—and a savourless life as 'base wallahs'.

But others found the outlook brighter. Already the 4th Reinforcements had departed, on furlough back home, and the 5ths were

being lined up for theirs. Nor did anyone doubt, at this stage, that final victory lay 'just round the corner'. Meanwhile anti-freeze mixture came on issue again, and mud-chains were much in evidence; a demand arose for charcoal and firewood as another white winter clamped down over **Italy**. When the first snows fell—on the night of 9-10 November— Petrol Company was concentrated near **Cerreto**. With the Division still resting in the **Apennines**—at **Camerino**, **Fabriano**, **Matelica**, **San Severino** and **Castel Raimondo**—work became lighter for the Company and a small party went on leave to **Florence**.

Meanwhile, north of **Rimini** Eighth Army was still slogging away in its 'Battle of the Rivers'. On 17 November New Zealand artillery went back into the line, and next day a composite platoon of NZASC, including six trucks from Petrol Company, moved forward for attachment to the Divisional Artillery, near **Cesena**. A petrol point was opened there, and on 23 November Company Headquarters, Workshops, and Nos. 2 and 4 Platoons also moved to **Cesena**, occupying billets in nearby **San Vittore**. No. 3 Platoon was away on detail at Chiaravalle; No. 1 spent the night at **Camerino**, with 23 Battalion, whom they brought to **Cesena**, just south of **Forli**, on the following day.

By now Eighth Army had inched its way forward to the Lamone River, about nine miles north of **Forli**, where the Germans held out strongly along a series of terraced stopbanks. On 26 November the New Zealand Division took over from **4 British Division** in contact with the enemy just north of Route 9—the highway that runs inland from **Rimini** to **Bologna**. Next day Petrol Company found itself an area right in **Forli**, now a 'khaki town' crammed with Allied troops.

Good locations were difficult to find, and apparently hard to hold; for Petrol Company's diary records, on 27 November: 'The CSM and a small party proceeded to the new area to guard it against all comers'. Workshops, on receiving advice that there was a possibility of losing the area assigned to them, packed up and moved at 10.30 p.m., arriving just on midnight. Next evening three aircraft raided the town; but Petrol Company sat pat in possession of their area, which afforded 'desirable

city residence' around some crossroads—though time had to be spent ridding the buildings of dirt and refuse left behind by the previous occupants. The main business, apart from issues, was a daily replenishment run to 239 Petrol Depot at **Cesena**.

On 3 December Harry Barnett, who had left New Zealand with Petrol Company's first echelon (and had, in the meantime, become OC of 18 Tank Transporter Company) returned as OC No. 2 Platoon and second-in-command of Petrol Company. Next day **Forli** saw something unusual in the way of sporting fixtures, when our lads ran a Primus Derby. Officials for this event were: *Chief Judge*: WO II Newland. *Assistants*: Sergeant Harding, Staff-Sergeant Martin. *Kero Official*: Driver Hartigan. *Timekeeper*: Driver Quigan. *Totalisator Officials*: Drivers Bullians and Francis.

Rules of the Course were laid down as follows:

1. Four mugs of water will be poured into each billy prior to commencement.
2. Billies will be supplied by officials.
3. Primus will be EMPTY prior to event and straight KERO will be supplied by Kero Official.
4. Entrance fee will be CINQUANTA Lire.
5. The Derby will be run in two heats of five starters; the FIRST and SECOND in each heat will compete in the FINAL.
6. The stake money will be as follows: Winning Horse in FINAL, 400 Lire. Second Horse, 150 Lire.

Ten acceptances duly lined up at the barrier, their jockeys receiving cheers, jeers, or hearty abuse as punters watched their 50-lire wagers either coming good or going down the drain. Results of the first heat were Baird's RED DEVIL (by Eruption out of Volcano) 1st; Francis's MUULTO STANCO (by Laborari out of Messenger) 2nd. Also ran: Bullians' SILENT WORKER (by On Leave out of **Florence**), Horwood's CONFIDENCE (by Falouse out of Insurance Company), and Moore's EVACUATION (by Casualty out of Flame Thrower).

Second heat placings were, 1st, Fox's TOOTS (by Oomph out of Ann

Sheridan); 2nd, Hollobon's HURRY UP (by Iggiri out of Presto). Also ran: Stead's SPITFIRE (by Helter-Skelter out of Danger), Jordan's REFUGEE (by Signaller out of Pesaro), and McKenna's STANDBACK (by Dangerous out of Safety Match). Final placings were TOOTS, HURRY UP, MULTO STANCO and RED DEVIL, in that order. The programme indicated that RAP 'wallahs' would be in attendance, and the Fire Squad would stand by for immediate action. Neither, however, was needed.

Early in December Petrol Company took part in the sorting and shuffling, from one place to another (under the direction of AMGOT) of the mass of civilian refugees who had flocked into Forli—a heart-rending assignment. More to their liking was the detail which commenced on 7 December, when thirty drivers and their offsiders from 1 Platoon found themselves carting rubble from demolished buildings in Forli to build a roadway up to the front. Loading began after dark that night, and was completed by 10.30 p.m.

Next morning the platoon drove forward to a point a mile and a half south of Faenza, where New Zealand engineers were building the road. The town was still in German hands, so our trucks returned under an artillery smoke-screen. This detail continued until 14 December. The convoys were usually shelled or mortared, but no damage or casualties resulted. An air raid on the evening of 10 December caused a scurry in Forli, killing a number of Allied soldiers and starting several small fires. No. 1 Platoon had just returned from their road-making job and were having a meal in the open, near their cookhouse. Some made a run for it, and reached a doorway just in time for the bomb-blast to blow them inside. Others took what cover they could and watched a string of Indian trucks coming round a corner into the street. Falling masonry crushed the bonnet of the leading vehicle, while the second had its steel cab flattened by another fall. The driver rolled out into the roadway, stunned, and was picked up by our men and taken to the RAP, where he soon recovered. Farther down the road some parked tank transporters were also caught by blast, one being blown clean over a 12-foot-high fence, a second one landing upside-down on top of another. The planes

strafed vehicles travelling along Route 9, south of **Forli**, damaging the tyres and radiators of two Petrol Company trucks and wounding Corporal Burling of 2 Platoon. He was evacuated to 1 NZ Mobile CCS.

That day, two jeeps from Petrol Company were attached to the newly-formed New Zealand Divisional Jeep Train—a composite platoon of the NZASC whose purpose was to move troops and lump supplies, by night, over crude tracks too rough for ordinary transport. Petrol Company also contributed a corporal fitter from Workshops and one operating section, comprising a corporal, a driver-mechanic and five drivers, for service with the Jeep Train—one of the toughest and riskiest assignments our men had ever taken on. Night after night, in fog, rain and bitter cold, they jerked and slithered their hazardous way forward, often under fire from artillery, small arms and mortars, and always at the risk of driving over mines or into ditches or shell-holes; for no lights, of course, were permitted.

By now the front was on the move again. On 14 December the New Zealand Division made a determined thrust, by-passing **Faenza** and capturing **Celle**, as part of a general assault by Eighth Army. **Faenza** also fell; and five days later a renewed attack brought Eighth Army to the River Senio. Meanwhile Petrol Company had been kept hard at it, lumping 25-pounder ammunition from **Cesena**, carting refugees from **Forli** to Meldola, uplifting petrol from Forlimpopoli, bringing reinforcements forward from **Senigallia**. Workshops trimmers toiled away at jeeps, closing them in for the winter. Fitters and mechanics patched up ambulances, now being mauled in increasing numbers; while carpenters commenced reconstructing a building, to be used as a messroom for Christmas.

Leaflets dropped over **Forli** were eagerly sought for their amusement value and for the insight they gave into the enemy's espionage system and its inaccuracies. A Petrol Company driver managed to souvenir one. It reads:

Boys of the 2nd NZ Division....

We were expecting you,

Because—invariably when the going becomes tough, you are needed. For example, in 1941 you were called to **Greece and **Crete**. Similarly in 1942 at **El Alamein**, **Tobruk** and in Al Gazala where your casualties were the highest on record.**

New Zealanders to the Front! was once again the cry as you were thrown into the hell of the **Sangro River** when you first came to **Italy** in November 1943; and because of that many of your friends who arrived with you at **Bari** have found a last resting-place in the soil of **Italy**.

Lest we forget.... Have you forgotten **Cassino? Do you recall that fateful Wednesday, 15th March 1944? Anything sooner than a repetition of that experience where such an alarming number of brave New Zealanders threw away their lives! It is unnecessary to remind you of each step in your wearisome journey. One has merely to mention **Orsogna**, **Arielli**, **Alvieto**, and **Sora**. And when you eventually crossed the **Arno** in August, how did your ranks compare with when you first arrived in **Italy**? After breaking through the **Gothic Line**, the rest in the **Rimini** area was all too short.**

Then once again the going became rough and the cry was ‘New Zealanders to the Front!’ Now on the eighth day of battle for **Faenza, after the British 56th Division failed with tragic losses, you are called to save the situation; you may reach **Faenza**, but every yard towards that town must be paid for with the life blood of hundreds of New Zealanders.... And so indefinitely it must go on. This cursed Italian soil must be fertilized with the precious blood of New Zealand Youth. And that youth is not inexhaustible. Your last reinforcements arrived from Egypt in the Spring of 1944. Since then you have suffered steady losses. These losses constitute the sacrifice of the future of New Zealand.**

FOR NEW ZEALAND IT IS A PATHETIC CASE OF ALL GIVE AND NO TAKE!

Transport details ceased on 25 December while all hands celebrated a 'white Christmas'—the second Christmas in **Italy** for most men, and the last one of the war. Supply Company came good with the usual special issues, including oysters, poultry, pork, fresh vegetables and Christmas cake. Unit cooks converted the raw materials into first-class dinners, the times for which were staggered in Petrol Company to allow Major Washbourn to visit each platoon while its full complement was assembled. He wished the men good cheer, and thanked them for their co-operation during the year. Similar compliments were passed by Brigadier Crump at an NZASC Christmas carol service held during the morning at the Esperia Theatre in **Forli**. Conducted by Padres Holland and **Burnett**,⁹ and helped by the NZASC Band, this service was attended by about half of Petrol Company. A special Christmas number of NZEF *Times* had been issued free to all ranks, and was allowed free postage to New Zealand.

January and February of 1945 go on record as dull months for Petrol Company. With the battlefield under a mantle of snow, and Jerry dug in beyond the River Senio, the war in **Italy** moved neither far nor fast. It scarcely moved at all, in fact—though elsewhere the Allies were lashing about. Our Company stuck it out at **Forli**, trying to keep warm in their cheerless billets—which were, of course, far preferable to bivvies or the front-line slit trenches. A rum ration helped, and the local *vino*, sometimes laced with an issue of vermouth. Weird stoves appeared, fuelled with diesel and emitting vile fumes and fearsome roars. Ten feet away water and other liquids froze.

These conditions created an entirely new problem at the petrol point—how to dispose of the normal but considerable quantity of leakage. In the prevailing low temperatures there was no evaporation, so the amount of petrol 'lying about loose' made a dangerous fire hazard, more so when it began running into the city gutters. The situation was met when a lead from the dump area into the main sewerage system was discovered and the overflow diverted into that. What became of the petrol afterwards nobody rightly knew; and our drivers brightly

conjectured that one day the city of **Forli** would blow up when someone, smoking a pipe or cigarette, set out to repair the sewerage.

With the Division now static, demands for POL were not exacting. A train service to **Forli**, opened in January, reduced the need for general road haulage. Petrol and ammunition were still our main cargoes, with some odd assignments bobbing up at times. These included the delivery of fuel to a local nunnery, and the shifting of local folk and their gear from buildings requiring evacuation, mostly near the **Forli** aero drome. These removals were made under the direction of AMGOT, and were sometimes resisted. Then our drivers saw exhibitions of dramatics in the true Italian operatic style, with Poppa, Mamma, Nana and all the *bambini* vociferously refusing to budge. At that stage, usually, the Carabinieri took over, sometimes using force to carry the day.

Weekly leave began to **Rome**, where the New Zealand Forces Club, established in the palatial Hotel Quirinale, now opened its bedrooms for the first time to other ranks. On 22 January one Petrol Company vehicle, carrying a leave party, slid off the icy road and capsized. Though the truck was badly damaged, the men escaped with little more than a shaking.

Big event for the Company during February was the departure of the 'veterans'—mostly survivors of the 5th Reinforcements, or men with early **Pacific Islands** service—for home leave under the Tongariro scheme. Exactly one hundred of these marched out, after due celebration, from Petrol Company, their place being taken by men of the **14th Reinforcements**, posted from Advanced Base. Among the departing went the Company's OC, Bill Washbourn. His place was taken by Harry Barnett, now promoted acting major. On the previous day Washbourn and four other Petrol Company officers had helped to celebrate another happy occasion—the wedding of Lieutenant-Colonel 'Bill' Bracegirdle, at **Senigallia**.

Early in March our Division pulled back to its former rest area in the **Apennines**. Here, as winter mellowed into spring, the New Zealand

Division was to 'get its breath' and then prepare for the next big effort—a part in the final hammer-blow the Allies were planning. Already the heat was on in **Germany**, with Allied and Russian armies crushing in from the east and the west. It was essential to smash the German forces in **Italy** to prevent them from helping to build a solid bulwark of resistance in the mountains south of **Germany**.

Petrol Company moved, on 1 March, to **Fabriano**, leaving 1 Platoon and a petrol issuing detachment at **Forli**. Petrol points were opened at **Fabriano** and **Castel Raimondo**, with the platoons maintaining these and supplying various other transport details. No. 1 Platoon rejoined the Company on 8 March, bringing in the remaining POL stocks from **Forli**. Again the Company shook down quickly to a fairly settled routine, with time for the odd game of rugby, leave to **Rome**, range practice, and even a weapon-training syllabus. Event of the month was another NZASC ceremonial parade for the GOC on 19 March, with **General Kippenberger** taking the salute. At the end of the month the Division moved up again to the **Senio** and most of the Company went to **Forli**, where Workshops provided a fitting funeral, complete with wooden coffin, for their mongrel puppy 'Prego', accidentally killed on 31 March.

Then suddenly, like a tornado, Eighth Army struck again in a crushing, smashing drive to end German resistance in **Italy**. Throughout the afternoon of 9 April, hordes of aircraft, silvered by sunlight, passed overhead to shower a deadly rain on the enemy rear areas. Ahead went giant Liberators and Flying Fortresses, followed by the 'mediums' and the fighter-bombers. They dropped altogether nearly 2000 tons of 20-pound fragmentation missiles, small bombs meant to kill and destroy without blasting the cavernous craters which had so impeded us at **Cassino**. Between waves of aircraft, the artillery took over, with guns of all calibres, 25-pounders, 4.5s, 5.5s and ponderous 7.2s—more altogether than we had at **Alamein**—flashing and roaring in a four-hour rampage.

After that the infantry went in, with New Zealand battalions storming across the **Senio** at the centre of Eighth Army's drive. Our Division now had three infantry brigades and an armoured one. On its

right were the Indians, on its left the Poles. In forty-eight hours the Division seared its way through six miles of strongly fortified country, hurling the Germans back across the **Santerno River**. By 16 April we had advanced 20 miles and crossed another river—the Sillaro—in the face of fierce opposition.

On the first day of the attack, seventy Petrol Company trucks made two lifts of ammunition from 501 AAD, **Cesena**, for delivery to 10 FMAS, **Ravenna**. Next day, 30 three-tonners of No. 4 Platoon and 12 from No. 3 stocked up with POL, ready to go forward and establish a mobile petrol point to service the advancing Division. This was opened by 7 a.m. on 11 April, with issues proceeding until 11 a.m. The vehicles then returned for replenishment of oil and diesel fuel from the Company's stocks at **Forli**, and of MT 80 from 17 Mobile Petrol Filling Centre. Next day Commander NZASC instructed that in future the Company would carry a new type of load—the second-line holding of flame-thrower fluid (FTF) totalling 3450 gallons of 'heavy' and 696 gallons of 'light'.

As the advance swung forward, Petrol Company, happy to be on the move again, followed close on the heels of the combat troops. While some platoons operated and replenished the mobile petrol points, others loaded ammunition at **Cesena** and delivered it to forward dumps and batteries. By 14 April our trucks were operating north of the **Senio**, with a Petrol Issuing Section at **Cotignola**. On the 17th the Company, less 4 Platoon and the **Cotignola** detachment, moved to **Massa Lombarda**, establishing a petrol point there with stocks brought forward from **Forli**. Another move on the following day took Company Headquarters and Nos. 2 and 4 Platoons to **Medicina**, where a point was opened, while No. 1 Platoon brought up 3.7-inch HE ammunition from **Cesena**, and No. 3 uplifted POL from 17 MPFC.

And so the Company toiled, by day and by night, over narrow, shell-pocked roads cluttered with a nose-to-tail jam of heterogeneous military traffic—guns, jeeps, trucks, Bren carriers, ambulances, tank transporters—streaming endlessly northward. The weather was fine, the air thick

with dust. All around lay the wreckage of war—ruined buildings, burnt-out tanks, charred transport, abandoned guns, the bodies of men and animals, some horribly charred by the deadly flame-throwers. Among the debris groups of civilians probed, seeking their belongings, or those of other people, regardless of the mines sown thickly everywhere. At night the noise of battle raged, beneath skies lit up with flares and gun-flashes.

By 20 April the Division had reached the line of the **Idice** River, where stiff resistance was expected. But there, as at the other rivers, the enemy soon cracked under the terrific punches now being delivered by Eighth Army. Nothing, it seemed, could stand up to the tremendous pounding by aircraft and artillery, followed by infantry attacks of great verve and élan. For our morale now was at its highest, and reminiscent of the post- **Alamein** era. Reminiscent, too, was the long stern chase which now began—up to and across the River Po, then on, ever on, to harry and hammer the fleeing enemy.

In such a programme guns become heavy feeders; so, on 19 and 20 April Petrol Company was again called upon to provide trucks to uplift 25-pounder and 7.2 howitzer ammunition from **Cesena** and deliver it to 1 NZ Ammunition Point. Ninety Petrol Company vehicles worked on this assignment, including thirty from No. 4 Platoon which set out at 10.30 p.m. after a long day spent uplifting POL and delivering it to the forward area. In Workshops Platoon, also, the sections worked long hours to get jobs completed quickly because of the mobile situation.

On 21 April 1 Platoon became attached to 6 Infantry Brigade for troop-carrying. Next day the platoon's trucks took the infantry into **San Giorgio**, where they encountered a pocket of the enemy, ten vehicles carrying men of 26 Battalion having entered the town ahead of our tanks. German planes were also active, bombing and strafing the convoys. In one hold-up during these attacks, two Petrol Company drivers evaded bullets by dodging around the sides of a *casa* while a low-flying plane strafed first one side and then the other. On 23 April a vehicle of Headquarters Section, No. 1 Platoon, ran over a mine in **San**

Giorgio and was wrecked. The driver, **K. E. Walls**,¹⁰ went over to a nearby *casa*—which happened to be occupied by Germans. They promptly took him prisoner, but later he managed to rejoin the unit. Next day (24 April) Workshops salvaged his disabled vehicle while moving up to a new Company area near Mirabella.

On Anzac Day our Company issued POL to the Division at **San Giorgio** and Mirabella, while transport from No. 1 Platoon, carrying men of 6 Brigade, crossed the River Po by pontoon bridge at sunset. Next day, in pouring rain, two No. 4 Platoon trucks delivered MT 80 to New Zealand engineers operating DUKWs (alias Ducks, or Fantails), tracked amphibian vehicles which waddled down to the river's edge loaded with stores, men and ammunition, then wallowed awkwardly across.

That day (26 April) 25 three-tonners from our Company opened a petrol point at **Ficarolo**, north of the river, on a site previously 'recced', at night, by Major Barnett. But maintaining the point proved a tough proposition, for at that stage north-bound traffic had the sole right-of-way, and nothing was allowed to travel back over the pontoon bridge. When issuing opened, stocks 'sold out' quickly, with many demands from British and other non-New Zealand units. These all had to be refused. Then, when petrol in hand fell to only 400 gallons, the situation looked black indeed.

Some trucks actually nosed right down to the water's edge, to test the possibility of fording the river; but this proved impracticable. Headquarters NZASC eventually got permission to send back some of our vehicles, while petrol was also brought forward in trucks carrying troops. So, by one means and another, supply was maintained, and our Division (claimed to be the only one not to run short of petrol north of the River Po) was kept mobile. So mobile, in fact, that a new difficulty soon arose—that of getting the empty jerricans back for refilling. By 1 May, however, Corps FMCs had moved north of the river, and Corps also released an extra 6000 jerricans on loan, so this and other supply difficulties were soon ironed out.

Once across the Po our Division raced forward, practically non-stop, across the **Adige River**, then on through **Badia**, **Este**, and **Monselice** to **Padua**, entering that city at 1 a.m. on 29 April. Like several other towns along the route, **Padua** had been liberated by Italian partisans and was now alive with these picturesque types, wearing red scarves and toting birettas, Sten guns, hand grenades, and other lethal weapons. There were also pockets of Germans and Fascists, who sometimes showed fight.

Our entry to **Padua** was a triumphal one, of the kind we remembered from Tunisian days. The streets were lined with cheering, clapping civilians, who waved flags, threw flowers, proffered gifts of food and wine. But this was no time for relaxation, or for harbouring any false sense of security. Grim work still remained to be done, with treachery, perhaps, to be countered. Soldiers kept their weapons ready.

Next day New Zealand troops pushed on another 50 miles to reach the River Piave. Petrol Company's No. 1 Platoon still carried men of 6 Brigade, while 4 Platoon, also, had been detailed now for troop-carrying. Groups of our trucks, numbering from about six to ten, were attached to each infantry company, usually with a tank for protection.

Company Headquarters and 3 Platoon set up shop at **Mestre**, an industrial suburb on the mainland opposite **Venice**. It was here that Fred Aickin and his driver, Bob **McGhie**,¹¹ came in for another of those off-duty adventures which form the highlights of most men's wartime experiences. Leaving their 'bug' with some 'tankies' of 4 Brigade, they crossed over to **Venice**, intent on spending a night at one of the city's best hotels. For this the price was 42 lire (roughly two shillings) so they quickly came to terms with the *padrone*.

He introduced them to a group of partisans—men and women, all armed to the teeth with grenades, knives, pistols, etc.—who were celebrating the city's liberation in a cellar under the building. Their chieftain, more than half 'tight', mounted a table to make a speech. In the midst of his oration (made mostly with the hands) he collapsed and

fell, carrying the table with him. He insisted, nevertheless, on finishing his speech—but safely seated on a chair. In a reasonably good dinner the *pièce de résistance* was labelled ‘roast beef’, as a compliment to the British; but it was still, for all that, horse-flesh.

Small German forces remained to dispute our crossing of the **Piave**; but these were soon disposed of, some going ‘into the bag’ among the 50,000 prisoners taken by our Division during the advance. By midnight on the last day of April the New Zealanders had got across the river and were heading for their last objective— **Trieste**.

¹ **Dvr L. W. Pope; Auckland**; born Longburn, 19 Jun 1916; upholsterer; wounded 2 Jun 1944.

² **Cpl R. Davis; Akaroa**; born NZ 23 Jun 1914; service-station proprietor; wounded 2 Jun 1944.

³ **Bates, *Supply Company*, p. 319.**

⁴ **Dvr D. Munro; Onehunga**; born NZ 28 Apr 1908; truck driver.

⁵ **Lt K. S. Perkins; Auckland**; born New Plymouth, 30 May 1914; commercial traveller.

⁶ **Ammunition Railhead**

⁷ **2 Lt S. J. Sampson**; born **Auckland**, 7 Oct 1912; retail butcher.

⁸ **Lt T. J. Chamberlain; Christchurch**; born NZ 25 Aug 1918; accountant.

⁹ **Rev. H. B. Burnett; Tauranga**; born NZ 24 May 1903; Presbyterian minister.

¹⁰ **Dvr K. E. Walls; Pinehaven, Upper Hutt; born Taranaki, 25 Apr 1921; bootmaker.**

¹¹ **Dvr R. G. McGhie; born Scotland, 1 Nov 1913; butcher.**

PETROL COMPANY

CHAPTER 18 – HOME AT LAST

CHAPTER 18

Home at Last

NEW ZEALAND forces, with 22 Battalion 'first in', entered **Trieste** during the afternoon of 2 May. That day the German Commander-in-Chief, **Italy** (Colonel-General von Vietinghoff-Scheel) surrendered, and the war there was over.

Forty-eight hours earlier, a crazed Nazi Fuehrer, amid the ruins of his devastated capital (on which, he had promised, no bomb would ever fall) took his own life. His successor, Admiral Doenitz, lost no time in suing for peace. At Rheims, on 8 May, he signed an instrument of unconditional surrender; and that ended the fateful German Third Reich—the 'Thousand Year Reich' of **Hitler's** wild dreams.

Once more at the spearhead of a triumphant Eighth Army, the New Zealand Division had fought its way in twenty-three days from the **Senio** to **Trieste**, a distance of 225 miles. In this advance it had smashed at least three German divisions and taken tens of thousands of prisoners.

To keep the Division fuelled, and so assist in sustaining Eighth Army's victorious drive, the load-carriers of Petrol Company drove an aggregate of nearly a quarter of a million miles, with POL issues, from 9 April to 4 May inclusive, totalling close on a million gallons. Daily issues of petrol and diesel fuel averaged 35,088 gallons. Besides this, our Company carried troops, ammunition, prisoners.

Traffic congestion, at its worst in this phase of the campaign, and comparable to that of the big retreats in **Greece** and North Africa, added both to our drivers' difficulties and to the over-all petrol consumption rate. To quote only one example: it took twelve hours for a convoy to travel 22 miles, mostly in low gear, on account of the general slow movement of traffic—which was not, alas, under **United States** control. Also, at this time, our Division was augmented by a number of British units placed under its command; and all these, too, required servicing.

While our forward elements were carving their way through strong German forces along the road to **Trieste**, Petrol Company opened and maintained petrol points, first at **Mestre**, then at Cervignano. On 1 May, troop-carriers of No. 1 Platoon, attached to 6 Brigade, moved to an area ten miles north of **Venice**, our transport taking some of the infantry for day leave to the city. Trucks from 4 Platoon moved with 5 Brigade into the same area and in the afternoon provided transport for the **Maori Battalion**, on mopping-up operations south of the **Piave** River. Next day 6 Brigade moved across the river to Villa Vicentina, while our vehicles with 5 Brigade carried troops to an area five miles east of **Monfalcone**. On the same day (2 May) eight three-tonners from 2 Platoon and ten from No. 1 went to 130 FMC at **Ficarolo** to uplift diesel fuel for the tanks. They found on arrival that 'the cupboard was bare', so they had to go right back to No. 3 Army Petrol Depot at **Ferrara** for supplies, their day's travel totalling 184 miles.

On 3 May Company Headquarters, with Nos. 2, 4 and Workshops Platoons, moved to Cervignano, some 40 miles short of **Trieste**. Next day they were joined there by all vehicles previously attached to the infantry brigades. Troop-carrying resumed on 6 May when twenty-two trucks from 3 Platoon uplifted 1 Battalion, **Scots Guards**, from Cervignano and carried them to 9 NZ Brigade's area near **Trieste**, while 4 Platoon, with thirty vehicles, went back to **Forli** for 2 NZEF reinforcements. In the meantime, maintaining the petrol point and carrying prisoners of war had kept the Company fully occupied.

By now Petrol Company, with the rest of the Division, was experiencing again that sense of anti-climax, amounting almost to frustration, which seems to follow inevitably on the heels of victory. Here as in **Africa**, a long campaign, full of trials and difficulties and with its quota of disasters and defeats, had ended triumphantly, climaxed by a swift, exhilarating pursuit and the surrender of a soundly beaten enemy. But in **Europe** now, not only a campaign but a whole war had ended; and for our 'citizen soldiers' what else remained, except home?

But home, for most, was still far off, especially for those who, caught in the 'pipeline', were only just arriving at this theatre of war. For them there was not even the taste of victory; no objectives, no incentives, no fierce gusts of action now, to lend a savour to army life—nothing but dull routine, the tedious task, and nostalgic longings for those either far away or gone, forever, beyond recall; and through it all, the gnawing conviction that these were years that the locusts had eaten. There was not even faith in the 'brave new world' which, they had been promised, peace would bring. For the aftermath of the last great 'war to end wars'—the greed, the selfishness, the slumps on 'civvy street'—were still quite fresh both in time and in memory.

On 12 May Petrol Company sent two platoons (Nos. 2 and 3) complete with cook-trucks and platoon headquarters, to the docks at **Trieste** to unload supplies and POL. In the city they found an 'uneasy peace', with dour Yugoslavs (both men and women) of Marshal Tito's forces patrolling the streets, their red-starred tricolour freely displayed. The Yugoslavs claimed **Trieste** as their own; and great care was needed, in a trigger-happy situation, to avoid incidents. Our men carried arms wherever they went; concentration areas were allocated in case of a general disturbance. Eventually an amicable settlement was reached and the Yugoslavs withdrew, the conduct of our troops having served very notably as a smoothing influence. Quick action by one New Zealand brigade, in fact, prevented a clash between Tito's Yugoslavs and 12,000 of General Mikhaelovic's Chetniks, who were induced, in the end, to lay down their arms.

Soon the ebullient Harry Barnett got a leave-scheme going for Petrol Company. At Grado, a lovely little spa on the Adriatic coast, he took over and staffed the Villa Saturnia, an *albergo* close to the waterfront, as a rest camp for the Company. He also formed, from Petrol Company members, a five-piece orchestra, which frequently played in the evenings for dances. In batches of forty to fifty, the Company took turns at spending a week in these pleasant surroundings. Mark Knyvett and some cronies found the hull of a derelict launch; so they 'acquired' a Chev

motor which Joe Frank and Co. Ltd (Workshops— always playful) managed to fit. But not being qualified marine engineers they struck some trouble with the pitch of the propeller, and couldn't get the motor out of second gear. With this minor drawback the launch functioned well as an all-purpose pleasure-craft, and many happy hours were spent 'mucking about' in it.

Equally enterprising were other Company members, now pretty comfortable in a Fiat factory, who collaborated with Divisional Supply Company (their Cervignano home was a cellulose works—a village in itself some three or four miles away) in cleaning out and filling a disused swimming bath. The water-supply was artesian, from deep underground; and when our chaps dived in, the ice-cold water gave a shock to their systems. Nevertheless the pool was used, on 3 June, for an NZASC aquatic sports meeting, when Petrol Company won the inter-unit swimming relay and the water polo. On points the placings were 1 NZ Supply Company, 1st; 1 NZ Ammunition Company, 2nd; 1 NZ Petrol Company, 3rd. Driver [Brewer](#)¹ was judged the most outstanding swimmer.

On 17 June the Company moved to an area near [Prosecco](#), on the outskirts of [Trieste](#). A petrol point was established there, and platoons not engaged in its operation and maintenance undertook duties of a varied nature. These included much transportation from the [Trieste](#) docks to dumps at [Udine](#) and [Palmanova](#); loads of fish, flour and other foodstuffs to an AMGOT store in the Company area, and POL for 132 FMC at Cervignano. Two loads per day were usual for our drivers, who often worked until 11 p.m.

Prisoners of war were also carted, from [Trieste](#) railway station to the refugee camp at [Mestre](#). On 20 June 3 Platoon uplifted Yugoslav troops at the railway station and transported them to a hill position near [Monfalcone](#). Some trucks were loaded with furniture, including several radios and a grand piano; but MPs arrived, and after an argument lasting five hours, the furniture was off-loaded. At the conclusion of this job, sixteen trucks returned to the Company area at 4 p.m.; the other

fourteen, which had been involved in the furniture episode, got back at 10.45.

But all was not toil and trouble. Four-day leave tours of **Italy** began, and daily excursions into **Austria**. An Alpine Leave Centre opened in the Dolomites. Dances were almost nightly affairs: at **Grado**, Tarzo, our officers' mess, the village hall at **Prosecco**—which had a large 74 painted on its main door—our men tripped the light fantastic (and no doubt performed other manoeuvres) with the comely local belles. Cricket began with inter-platoon matches. Nevertheless, despite this leisure and the slump in hostilities, the Company's vehicles travelled an aggregate of 293,444 miles during June, and POL issues exceeded 547,000 gallons.

At 6 p.m. on 21 July the Company left **Prosecco**, on the first leg of a journey which took them back to **Lake Trasimene**, some 440 miles farther south. They reached there on the evening of the 23rd, and next day opened a petrol point.

Soon it became clear that a large-scale 'fiddle' was being worked with petrol. Records of supplies drawn from the FMCs did not tally with issue totals (which in July still exceeded half-a-million gallons) and a strict watch was kept.

This led to the court martial of one suspect, who was already on his way back to **Bari**, for repatriation, when picked up. An identification parade was held, but through an oversight its members were not all dressed alike, as required by regulations; so the prisoner was discharged on this technical ground.

Better luck attended a fine sleuthing effort by Petrol Company officers, and led to an exciting 'cloak and dagger' adventure. On the evening of 28 July, two Italian civilians approached Lieutenant Perkins (who was wearing shorts and shirt, without badges of rank) and signified their willingness to purchase petrol. Perkins dickered with the two for a while, then went off to fetch Captain **Crawford**,² making sure that he, also, appeared 'incognito'. These two then arranged to produce a

hundred four-gallon cans of petrol on the night of 29 July, agreeing to meet the purchasers at 8.30 p.m. for further directions.

Major Barnett and the Divisional provost were apprised, of course, and Perkins duly kept his rendezvous. He was instructed to take the petrol at 10 p.m. to a house not 400 yards away from the Company area. He protested this was too risky; they would be discovered, etc., etc. But the Italian assured him that a vehicle would uplift the petrol during the night and take it well away. Eventually, Perkins and Crawford delivered the load, and were paid 48,000 lire. Meanwhile Harry Barnett, Mark Knyvett, and Lieutenant Chamberlain of Petrol Company, with a provost sergeant and lance-corporal and a couple of jeeps, kept watch along the road, where they were joined later by Perkins and Crawford.

Soon after midnight a truck was noticed leaving the house. One of the jeeps then pulled out into the roadway and staged a 'breakdown'. The driver flagged the oncoming truck, asking for the loan of a pair of pliers. While these were being produced, other members of our party emerged from the shadows and, unobserved, searched the back of the truck. They found no petrol.

The jeep party then parked off the roadway and waited. About two hours later, a four-and-a-half tonner drove up to the house; and soon our party heard the tell-tale sound of cans being loaded. Eventually the truck came belting past, with headlights blazing. The jeeps gave chase, without lights, and one of them managed to trail their quarry.

The truck was overtaken after about 12 miles; and on being pulled up, one of the two Italians made a break for it. A pistol shot soon brought him back. The civilians then agreed to lead our party to the home of their employer.

The *padrone* and an associate were in bed when the visitors arrived, but they were quickly routed out and put under arrest, along with the two Italian truck-drivers. All were then piled on top of the load of contraband and driven back to Petrol Company Headquarters.

Throughout August, and for most of September, the bulk of the Company remained in the **Lake Trasimene** area, on miscellaneous carrying duties and running a petrol point there while a detachment (from Nos. 2 and 3 Platoons alternately) operated another at **Mondolfo**. On 10 September 138 single men—the balance of the **8th Reinforcements**—left on the first leg of their return to New Zealand.

This marked the ‘beginning of the end’ for Petrol Company. From then until it finally washed up in mid-December, the Company was in a state of flux, seeming to disintegrate rather than disband, as one group after another joined the ranks of departing drafts—up to and including the **12th Reinforcements** —or transferred to J Force. On 4 October the Company moved into billets at **Florence**, where HQ **2 NZEF** (transported from **Senigallia** by thirty-one trucks of our No. 1 Platoon) also settled in on 10 October. That day Harry Barnett handed over to Major Coutts as OC Petrol Company, but later in the month both Barnett and Coutts went on leave to the United Kingdom, where Petrol Company men, in batches of up to sixty, were also proceeding. Meanwhile Captain **Richards**³ assumed acting-command.

When Barnett returned to **Italy** early in November he was given the task of organising the J Force 19 ASC Company, which he eventually took, as its first commander, to **Japan**. This company numbered over 400, including our Nos. 2 and 4 Platoons, which it absorbed on 17 November, together with selected vehicles from Nos. 1 and 3 Platoons.

And so, bit by bit, Petrol Company faded out. By the middle of December only a handful of its trucks remained to service the remnant of the Division in **Italy**. As vehicles became surplus through the departure of their drivers, they were delivered to a British depot at **Assisi**. Trevor Sims drove the last Petrol Company truck there—a fitting ‘final flourish’ to his six-and-a-half years’ service with Petrol Company, from the day of its inception to the last return home, and including every campaign in which the Company took part.

¹ **Dvr G. H. Brewer; Wanganui; born Wanganui, 28 Feb 1914; hairdresser.**

² **Capt A. M. Crawford, ED; Lincoln; born NZ 8 Oct 1919; commercial traveller.**

³ **Capt K. L. Richards, m.i.d.; Rotorua; born Palmerston North, 21 Mar 1907; transport manager.**

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PETROL COMPANY

ROLL OF HONOUR

Roll of Honour

KILLED IN ACTION

| | |
|---------------------------------------|------------------------|
| Capt W. G. S. McDonagh, m.i.d. | 20 May 1941 |
| 2 Lt N. F. Chissel | 18 April 1941 |
| 2 Lt A. N. MacShane | 5 November 1942 |
| Sgt H. R. Hopley | 21 May 1941 |
| Cpl H. O. Thwaites | 25 May 1941 |
| Dvr F. H. Bennett | 14 April 1941 |
| Dvr N. B. Briggs | 27 May 1941 |
| Dvr I. E. Cant | 18 April 1941 |
| Dvr T. H. Christison | 24 April 1943 |
| Dvr R. J. Davis | 24 April 1943 |
| Dvr R. G. Davis | 20 May 1941 |
| Dvr O. L. Fuller | 2 June 1941 |
| Dvr R. H. Gillies | 21 May 1941 |
| Dvr T. R. Goodisson | 2 June 1941 |
| Dvr C. Hammond | 26 May 1941 |
| Dvr I. A. Harrison | 2 June 1941 |
| Dvr E. Isherwood | 21 May 1941 |
| Dvr W. A. Mackinder | 21 May 1941 |
| Dvr D. C. W. Meurk | 24 April 1943 |
| Dvr E. V. Pickering | 21 May 1941 |
| Dvr J. D. Piper | 20 May 1941 |
| Dvr J. J. Robertson | 21 April 1944 |
| Dvr K. J. Sandbrook | 26 May 1941 |
| Dvr E. T. H. Toner | 21 May 1941 |

DIED OF WOUNDS

| | |
|----------------------------|----------------------|
| Dvr E. L. Corry | 14 May 1941 |
| Dvr H. W. Morgan | 19 April 1941 |
| Dvr G. F. Parnell | 21 May 1941 |
| Dvr A. H. A. Ruback | 22 May 1941 |
| Dvr C. R. Standen | 21 May 1941 |

Dvr I. W. Standen 20 May 1941

Dvr G. C. Thornton 2 June 1941

DIED OF WOUNDS WHILE PRISONER OF WAR

Dvr C. W. Elliot 28 May 1941

Dvr V. T. Heron 27 May 1941

Dvr M. F. Mexted 25 May 1941

Dvr A. N. Norton 2 June 1941

DIED ON ACTIVE SERVICE

L-Sgt C. E. Hardaker 27 June 1942

Dvr E. J. Bell 19 March 1942

Dvr J. W. Clare 29 August 1941

Dvr T. W. Henderson 5 December 1941 *

Dvr J. McComb 10 March 1944

Dvr M. C. Talbot 28 August 1940

Dvr W. M. Walsh 6 November 1943

Dvr R. L. Young 29 December 1943

* Drowned off **Tobruk** in sinking of *Chakdina*.

PETROL COMPANY

SUMMARY OF CASUALTIES

Summary of Casualties

| | Killed or Died of Wounds | Wounded | | Wounded Prisoners and PW | | Prisoners of War | Died on Active Service | TOTAL |
|-------------------------------------|---|----------------|--------------|-------------------------------------|------------|-----------------------------|---|--------------|
| | <i>Offrs</i> | <i>ORs</i> | <i>Offrs</i> | <i>ORs</i> | <i>ORs</i> | <i>ORs</i> | <i>ORs</i> | |
| Libya, 1940 | – | – | – | 2 | – | – | – | 2 |
| Greece | 1 | 4 | 1 | 4 | – | 1 | – | 11 |
| Crete | 1 | 24 | * 1 | 40 | 21 | 96 | – | 183 |
| Libya, 1941 | – | – | – | 2 | – | 1 | 1 | 4 |
| Egypt, 1942 | 1 | – | – | 1 | – | – | – | 2 |
| Tripolitania and Tunisia | – | 3 | 1 | 9 | – | – | – | 13 |
| Italy | – | 1 | 1 | 7 | – | – | – | 9 |
| | | | | | | | 7 | 7 |
| | <hr/> | <hr/> | <hr/> | <hr/> | <hr/> | <hr/> | <hr/> | <hr/> |
| | 3 | 32 | 4 | 65 | 21 | 98 | 8 | 231 |

* Includes 4 prisoners of war who died of wounds.

PETROL COMPANY
HONOURS AND AWARDS

Honours and Awards

OFFICER OF THE ORDER OF THE BRITISH EMPIRE

Major F. Trewby

MEMBER OF THE ORDER OF THE BRITISH EMPIRE

Major H. W. Barnett

Major G. S. Forbes

Major A. F. McCook

MILITARY CROSS

Capt H. A. Rowe

DISTINGUISHED CONDUCT MEDAL

Dvr W. J. Siely

MILITARY MEDAL

Sgt D. R. Plumtree

Cpl K. A. Bailey

Cpl N. M. Stewart

Dvr H. Eckersley

Dvr D. T. Peel-Walker

Dvr E. B. Thompson

BRITISH EMPIRE MEDAL

Cpl A. A. Gilmore

Cpl K. R. D. Drummond

PETROL COMPANY

OFFICERS COMMANDING

Officers Commanding

| | |
|-------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Maj A. C. Dickson | 27 Sep 1939-27 Apr 1941 * |
| Capt W. G. S. McDonagh | 27 Apr 1941-20 May 1941 |
| Capt H. A. Rowe | 20 May 1941- 1 Jun 1941 |
| Maj G. S. Forbes | 26 Jun 1941-17 Apr 1944 |
| Maj W. A. G. Washbourn | 18 Apr 1944-7 May 1944 |
| Maj G. G. Good | 7 May 1944-18 Jul 1944 |
| Maj W. A. G. Washbourn | 18 Jul 1944-9 Feb 1945 |
| Maj H. W. Barnett | 10 Feb 1945-10 Oct 1945 |
| Maj P. E. Coutts | 10 Oct 1945-20 Dec 1945 |

* **Maj Dickson did not officially relinquish command until 26 Jun 1941.**

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