

# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

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**All unambiguous end-of-line hyphens have been removed, and the  
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**Some keywords in the header are a local Electronic Text Centre scheme  
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## [COVERS]

NEW ZEALAND IN THE SECOND WORLD WAR  
(Part 1)



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### AIRCRAFT AGAINST U-BOAT

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v

H. L. Thompson

WAR HISTORY BOARD  
DEPARTMENT OF DEFENCE AFFAIRS  
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1948

# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## [FRONTISPIECE]



Pilot looking Coastal Command Sunderland

*Visual lookout, Coastal Command Sunderland*

**COVER PHOTOGRAPH U-boat under air attack**

# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

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## AIRCRAFT AGAINST U-BOAT

*Episodes from the work of New Zealand airmen in the Battle of the  
Atalantic*

*November 1942 – November 1943*

**H. L. Thompson**

**WAR HISTORY BRANCH**

**DEPARTMENT OF INTERNAL AFFAIRS WELLINGTON, NEW ZEALAND**

**1950**

# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

[EDITORPAGE]

**IT IS THE INTENTION** *of this series to present aspects of New Zealand's part in the Second World War which will not receive detailed treatment in the campaign volumes and which are considered either worthy of special notice or typical of many phases of our war experience. The series is illustrated with material which would otherwise seldom see publication.*

**H. K. KIPPENBERGER**

,  
**Major-General**  
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

NEW ZEALAND WAR HISTORIES

# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## BATTLE OF THE ATLANTIC

## **BATTLE OF THE ATLANTIC**

**‘The only thing that ever really frightened me during the war was the U-boat peril.’—**

**Winston S. Churchill in *Second World War*, Vol. II.**

**ONE OF THE MOST VITAL battles of the Second World War, and certainly the longest, was that fought at sea against the German U-boats. The island fortress of Britain had to be supplied with both food and war materials so that its survival depended upon the maintenance of supremacy at sea. The Germans realised this, and after their failure in the Battle of Britain they sought by sea and air attack to close the supply routes by which the British people could carry on the war and thus bring about their starvation and surrender.**

**The U-boat was by far the greatest menace. In the First World War it had brought Britain to the verge of defeat; but the lesson had been forgotten. In 1939 the Royal Navy was woefully short of escort vessels while Coastal Command \* of the Royal Air Force, whose main task was to aid the Navy, was equipped with a handful of aircraft, most of them obsolescent types whose weapons were hopelessly inadequate for dealing with the modern U-boats which the Germans were constructing. Airborne radar and the other technical aids that were later to play such an important part in the battle were still in the experimental stage. Only gradually was this state of affairs remedied, and it proved most difficult to keep pace with the expansion of the German U-boat fleet and the extension of its activities to the wider spaces of the Atlantic as well as to the many focal areas of Allied shipping. Indeed, during 1942, when over six million tons of Allied merchant shipping were lost through U-boat attacks, the situation became critical, and it was not until the end of the following year that the Allies could be said to have taken the measure of the U-boat threat.**

**A deciding factor in this favourable turn of events was the success achieved by aircraft over the Bay of Biscay and the convoy routes in the**

**North Atlantic** during 1943. Of 145 U-boats sunk in these areas during that year, 94 were destroyed by attack from the air. Even so the Germans were not beaten and they later returned to the attack with new weapons and devices which were never completely countered. The battle continued to the end and ceased only when the last German U-boat at sea had been escorted to a British port, flying a black flag of surrender.

New Zealand airmen flew with the anti-submarine squadrons of **Coastal Command** during the war as pilots, navigators, wireless operators, and gunners, while a small number did useful work in various ground duties. Two New Zealand squadrons were formed in **Coastal Command**: No. 489 Squadron, which served mainly in an anti-shipping role along the Norwegian Coast and in the North Sea, and No. 490 Squadron, which did valuable work over the West African convoy routes. But the large majority of the New Zealanders in **Coastal Command** were scattered among **Royal Air Force** units and often among the crews of squadrons. In fact, as in Bomber Command, many of them flew in crews made up of men from various parts of the Commonwealth. Altogether, New Zealand airmen took part in the destruction of twenty-four German U-boats, and in seven of these cases a New Zealander was captain of the aircraft which made the attack. But it is outside the scope of this account to describe all their experiences during the long years of the war at sea. What is attempted in the following pages is a few glimpses of various phases of their work during the period from November 1942 to November 1943 when the Battle of the **Atlantic** was at its height and when aircraft played a decisive part in the struggle.

Aircraft, however, had not been ineffective in the war at sea before this period, even though the actual number of U-boats destroyed by them was small. Their defensive work in protecting convoys and in keeping U-boats submerged had been invaluable, so that many a ship owed its safe arrival to the vigilant watch maintained from the air. When independent offensive patrols were increased during the second half of 1941, aircraft were largely responsible for driving the German submarines from the Western Approaches to operate farther out in the **Atlantic** where targets

were more difficult to locate. Prisoners taken towards the end of that year spoke with feeling of the air patrols which forced them continually to dive, while Grand Admiral Doenitz, Commander-in-Chief of the German Navy, complained that 'aircraft were locating and attacking the U-boat dispositions so that their patrol areas were avoided by convoys'. One U-boat even surrendered to a Hudson aircraft after the latter's depth-charge attack. The vessel was subsequently towed to port and provided valuable information.

Nevertheless, inefficient weapons and the lack of suitable technical aids rendered the early air attacks more of a harassing nature. They inflicted a certain amount of damage and often forced U-boats to lose touch with convoys, but were only occasionally successful in completely destroying the enemy. The U-boat was an elusive and difficult target to attack from the air and its construction was so tough that the depth-charge then in use had to fall within a few feet of the hull in order to split it.

Throughout 1942 the air offensive had continued, but with the limited range of the aircraft then available the U-boats were able to play havoc with convoys in mid- [Atlantic](#). However, by the end of the year, science and industry had begun to provide aircraft of longer range, an improved type of radar, and better weapons, such as the torpex-filled depth-charge and the Leigh Light for attacks by night. Along with these technical aids, new tactics were evolved which enabled air power to be employed with much greater effect in the following year.

During 1943, the main types of operational U-boats used by the Germans were vessels of 517 and 740 tons, carrying crews of about 45 and 55 respectively, although they were also building 1600-tonners for long cruises and for supply. These craft were specially constructed to withstand the underwater blast of depth-charges and had an extra pressure hull of high tensile steel. They had two sets of machinery: Diesel engines for propulsion on the surface and electric motors for use when submerged, the latter also serving as dynamos for re-charging batteries on the surface. Maximum speed on the surface was about



**seventeen knots but the normal cruising speed of eight knots gave an endurance of some 10,000 miles. When travelling submerged on both motors, top speed was about 7½ knots, but then battery endurance was only two hours. At lower speeds a U-boat could remain submerged much longer, but the air became so foul that normally the vessel would not stay down for more than twenty hours at a time. Towards the end of the war this handicap was overcome by fitting U-boats with the Schnorkel device—air intake and exhaust tubes that could be raised at periscope depth, enabling the air to be changed and the batteries recharged whilst the vessel remained submerged.**

**When on patrol the U-boat's lookout was of a high order, four men on duty at a time standing back to back in the conning tower, each searching an arc of 90 degrees. They were supplied with excellent binoculars and the watches were changed frequently. In clear weather they would often sight an aircraft at such a range that the boat could dive in time to avoid attack, but the skilful use of sun and cloud cover would defeat them. Furthermore, in a heavy sea, the watch could never be fully efficient because of the rolling of the U-boat and the spray.**



**U-BOAT FOUNDERING**

**The principal weapon employed in the air attacks on U-boats during 1943 was the 250 lb. depth-charge set to explode at twenty-five feet below the surface. Aircraft carried from four to eight according to their type and the length of their patrol. They were aimed visually by the pilot**

but were released by an electrical distributor so that they fell in an evenly spaced stick, the idea being to straddle the U-boat so that one depth-charge fell near enough to cause lethal damage. Aircraft usually patrolled at heights up to 5000 feet according to cloud cover but the actual attack was made from about fifty feet. This had to be a short and sharp affair before the U-boat crash- dived, yet it was not easy to manoeuvre a heavy four-engined aircraft into the correct position for a successful attack while the target was still visible.

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\* The name was retained throughout the war although it soon became an Ocean Command with bases extending from **Iceland** to **West Africa**.

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**EPIISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2**  
**COVERING THE NORTH AFRICAN LANDINGS**

## **COVERING THE NORTH AFRICAN LANDINGS**

**AN INDICATION of the more effective role aircraft were soon to play in the U-boat war was provided during the North African landings in November 1942. During that month, of nine U-boats destroyed in the Western Mediterranean, four were sunk by air attack alone, four by surface vessels, and another by combined assault.**

**Several New Zealanders flying with No. 500 Hudson Squadron had very successful hunting during this period. Their unit was one of several sent to Gibraltar to hunt U-boats in the sea lanes through which the convoys were passing to invade North Africa. This was a welcome change of activity as for the previous nine months the squadron had been based at Stornaway, in the Outer Hebrides, whence it patrolled over the bleak waters to the north of **Scotland**. On arrival at Gibraltar, after a 1200-mile flight from **Cornwall**, they found the air base at the 'Rock' very crowded, every inch being taken up by either an aircraft or a can of petrol. D-day for the North African landings was close at hand and this was the only place available as a jumping-off point, for, in November 1942, the Allies possessed no other single piece of ground in all Western Europe and the **Mediterranean** west of **Malta**. In fact, **Britain's** possession of Gibraltar made possible the invasion of North Africa. The development of a flying-boat base there had been difficult enough, but the construction of an airfield with an adequate runway extending into the sea was a much harder task. Gibraltar is only three miles long and varies from 600 yards to one and a half miles in width, but more than three-fifths of this area is high rock tunnelled for military purposes and useless for an airfield. The small sandy plain, a racecourse in former days, which joins Gibraltar to Spanish territory, was converted into an aerodrome at the outbreak of war. Later it was extended so that, by the end of 1942, a tarmac strip extended well out into Algeciras Bay.**

**As the first convoys were already approaching the Straits, the Hudsons began operations immediately. During the next three weeks No. 500 Squadron flew over 200 sorties and attacked thirty-four U-boats;**

three of these have now been confirmed as destroyed. Two of these successful attacks were made by New Zealand pilots. Throughout the month flying conditions were generally good with visibility almost unlimited except during heavy but infrequent storms which passed quickly. On most days conditions were ideal for carrying out surprise attacks, since aircraft patrolling at heights between 5000 and 8000 feet were, with few exceptions, flying either through or over broken cloud with excellent visibility down sun.

On 6 November, two days before the landings began, anti-submarine patrols were flown to the east of Gibraltar ahead of the convoys, and it was while engaged in one of these missions that Pilot Officer H. A. Poole<sup>1</sup> made the squadron's first attack. In fact, he had the unusual experience of attacking two U-boats in the course of a single patrol. The first was sighted in the act of diving, and by the time the Hudson reached the spot it had been submerged for some twenty seconds. Nevertheless, the four depth-charges that were dropped must have shaken the submarine as its stern immediately rose above the surface for a few moments before it finally disappeared. In the second attack the submarine had dived about a minute before the aircraft reached it and no results were seen.

On the following day the convoys were nearing the landing points. Strong air cover was provided, including many patrols and sweeps flown by the anti-submarine aircraft from Gibraltar. Just before midday Flight Lieutenant H. G. Holmes<sup>2</sup> sighted a U-boat 'travelling at high speed on the surface a few miles south of the Fleet'. He achieved complete surprise in his attack, the depth-charges straddling the enemy vessel while it was still on the surface. A piece of metal was seen to fly into the air in the midst of the explosions and subsequently large quantities of oil appeared on the surface of the sea. About the same time, Squadron Leader I. C. Patterson<sup>3</sup> saw a German submarine on the surface some fifteen miles ahead. He was able to approach unobserved, but in his first attack the depth-charges failed to release. A second attempt, a few seconds after the enemy had dived, brought air bubbles to the surface

but no other sign of damage was seen.

The next day, 8 November, twelve aircraft from No. 500 Squadron, four of which were piloted by New Zealanders, were employed in protecting the naval forces and convoys landing troops on the beaches in the vicinity of **Oran** and **Algiers**. The work of guarding this shipping against submarine attack was continuous from dawn to dusk, the Hudsons flying perimeter patrols outside the destroyer screen in excellent weather. No submarines were seen and no enemy aircraft attempted to hinder the landing.

During the next two days, while anti-submarine patrols continued, a detachment of Hudsons moved to the airfield at Tafaroui, near **Oran**, to provide closer protection to the large concentrations of shipping in the approaches to the landing areas. The ground crews had already landed with the Americans, spending two days and nights on the beaches sniping and being sniped at. When the airfields were captured they exchanged tommy-guns for spanners and immediately began servicing the Hudsons as they flew in from Gibraltar. Tafaroui had good runways but servicing the aircraft proved difficult during the first few days. Nevertheless the ground crews were adept at improvisation. For instance, refuelling with the American four-gallon petrol tins was a problem until someone produced the spinners \* off several abandoned French aircraft and with the aid of a short length of pipe soldered to the bottom made a very serviceable petrol filler. Aircrews slept on the hangar floors without any covering except their flying clothing, and as there was some danger from snipers and also of sabotage one member of each crew slept in the aircraft.

So far most of the patrols had been uneventful, but the next week there were many sightings and attacks as the U-boats made strenuous efforts to intercept the supply convoys. On 12 November Flight Lieutenant I. R. Mitchell's <sup>4</sup> aircraft attacked a diving U-boat and brought oil to the surface, while Holmes put destroyers on the scent of another which had submerged before he could attack it. Patterson had three sightings in the course of one patrol during the following morning.

His first was made at a distance of nearly twenty miles, but evidently the U-boat lookouts spotted the Hudson as the submarine dived before an attack could be made. However, employing the skill and patience derived from long experience in hunting U-boats, Patterson flew away from the area and returned later, using cloud to conceal his approach. His perseverance was rewarded when, shortly after his return, a U-boat was seen surfacing. Still using cloud cover, Patterson manoeuvred his machine into a position from which he was able to deliver a surprise attack. The stern of the submarine was blown out of the water and the vessel assumed a vertical position with some twenty feet of its hull above the surface. It remained like this for nearly a minute and then went down at the same angle. Soon afterwards gushes of air and oil came to the surface and continued to rise for some minutes. The same afternoon another Hudson pilot, Flight Lieutenant M. A. Ensor, <sup>5</sup> while flying just above broken cloud, saw a fully surfaced U-boat below him through a clear patch. He immediately dived to attack and was able to release his depth-charges just as the enemy submarine submerged. They were well aimed, as a few moments later the U-boat reappeared midst a mass of foam and air bubbles. Several of the crew then appeared on the conning tower and opened fire on the aircraft. This fire was silenced but unfortunately the Hudson was compelled through shortage of fuel to leave the scene before assistance arrived. The damaged U-boat was then circling slowly on the surface.

On 14 November Mitchell took part in an attack on another German submarine which was eventually forced to beach itself near **Oran** after concentrated attacks by several Hudsons from No. 500 Squadron. Further successes followed. On patrol the next morning Holmes saw a target on the surface ten miles away. By stalking his quarry with the aid of cloud, he was able to make a surprise attack which brought oil and air bubbles to the surface although no further evidence of damage was seen.

Ensor had better luck the same morning, some forty miles off **Algiers**, when he literally blew a German submarine to pieces in what was one of the most spectacular attacks of the whole war. After the

initial sighting about ten miles away, an approach through cloud enabled him to attack while the U-boat was still on the surface. The four depth-charges appeared to straddle the vessel just ahead of the conning tower, but one of them must have struck the hull for immediately there was a terrific explosion, followed by two more inside the U-boat, which flung the forward gun into the air and ripped the conning tower wide open. When the upheaval had subsided, the bows of the U-boat were seen on the surface for a few seconds amidst an area of bubbles before it sank. The Hudson itself was blown several hundred feet into the air and badly shattered by the first explosion. The rudders and elevators were torn off and the ailerons damaged; the turret and cabin floor were blown in and several feet of each wing tip was bent almost vertically upwards. In this condition the aircraft was climbed to 1500 feet and flown towards [Algiers](#), Ensor using the crew as moveable ballast and steering on the engines. However, after fifteen minutes, one engine suddenly gave out and the Hudson became uncontrollable so that the crew, were forced to abandon it by parachute. Only two of them, Ensor and his wireless operator, were picked up, a most unfortunate sequel to a very successful attack and a superb display of airmanship.

‘The trip back was a nightmare,’ Ensor said afterwards. ‘Sometimes the plane's nose would dip steeply and I had to signal the crew to run into the tail to balance it. Then the tail would drop, whereupon they would have to run to the nose. It was when we were nearly home and congratulating ourselves that all was well that the engine gave out.’

Misfortune of a different kind attended another successful attack by Squadron Leader Patterson two days later, when he caught an enemy submarine unawares on the surface. The U-boat's stern was lifted clean out of the water and the conning tower stove in by the explosions of the depth- charges which straddled it. Attempts by the crew to man the machine guns were prevented by fire from the aircraft. Smoke was coming from inside the vessel and some of the crew leapt over the side. Others came on deck waving white objects in token of surrender. As it was now certain that the submarine was disabled and as other aircraft



had reached the scene, Patterson flew to a nearby airfield to report the opportunity of capturing a valuable prize. A destroyer was sent out from **Algiers** and Patterson refuelled his aircraft in order to act as guide, but just before the destroyer reached the scene a naval aircraft torpedoed the U-boat, which exploded and sank.

The last patrols from the airfield at Tafaroui were flown on 18 November, in the course of which two more attacks were made, one of them by Holmes, after which a large amount of oil and air bubbles came to the surface for over half an hour before the Hudson was forced to leave the scene.

No. 500 Squadron now moved to Blida airfield, about thirty miles south-west of **Algiers**. This was an established base, and as the French had not sabotaged any of their equipment the squadron fared better as regards the maintenance of their aircraft. There were no runways, however, only a surface of hard mud. The aircrew were quartered in a large barrack block which had two tiers of solid iron bedsteads. 'The place,' according to one pilot, 'resembled the interior of a prison.' All forms of insect life were rampant and most of the men were more or less severely bitten. However, the liberal use of blowlamps and disinfectant gradually improved the conditions.

Operations were continued without a break and during the following days patrols were flown continuously from the new base. During the first flights from Blida, Holmes made another attack on a U-boat, his fifth in thirteen days. Very large air bubbles were observed as if the vessel was attempting to resurface and subsequently a patch of oil appeared, approximately thirty yards in diameter. Thereafter, sightings and attacks became noticeably fewer and before the end of the month it was clear that the enemy had decided to reduce the scale of his attack in the Western **Mediterranean**. In fact, most of the U-boats withdrew and moved to the Northern Atlantic. In their operations against the North African convoys, amply provided with air cover, they had suffered heavy casualties and sunk comparatively few ships. The wear and tear of constant crash-diving was extremely severe on the U-boat crews and

had intensified the dislike felt by their captains for the narrow waters of the **Mediterranean**. Therefore it was with considerable relief that they returned to their old hunting grounds on the convoy routes in the **North Atlantic**, where the main battle was being fought under conditions more favourable to them.

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\* **The conical hub on some types of airscrews.**

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# EPIISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## NORTH ATLANTIC PATROLS

## ***NORTH ATLANTIC PATROLS***

**ON THE MORNING** of 22 April 1943 a Coastal Command Liberator from **Iceland** landed at Goose Bay airfield in Labrador after an 18-hour patrol. Its crew, which included two New Zealanders, the co-pilot and the navigator, were stiff and tired after their long flight. They had taken off from Reykjavik early the previous afternoon, met a convoy in mid-**Atlantic**, and remained with it for nearly five hours. During this time a U-boat was sighted and attacked. Then, after receiving a message from base advising a deterioration in landing conditions there, the Liberator had flown on across the **Atlantic**. It was the first operational aircraft to land at Goose Bay.

This patrol is of particular interest as it illustrates an important stage that had been reached in the Battle of the **Atlantic**—the stage when air cover could at last be provided over the whole of the **North Atlantic** convoy route. It was the climax of a campaign which had begun three years before when a steadily increasing fleet of U-boats had operated successfully in the focal points of shipping— the Western Approaches to the **British Isles** and later off the American seaboard. Then, as the number and range of shore-based aircraft on either side of the ocean increased, the U-boats had continued their depredations in mid- **Atlantic**, outside the range of air cover.

The early months of 1943 saw the peak of their efforts in this area. By then there were approximately one hundred U-boats at sea at any one time. Spread in long lines across the shipping routes, one or other of them would sight and shadow a convoy, assembling others for a series of attacks



COASTAL COMMAND SUNDERLAND ON CONVOY PATROL

which might continue for several days. But vigorous counter-measures were now being taken. Chief among them was the provision of more and longer-range aircraft and the expansion of bases in Northern Ireland, the Hebrides, and **Iceland**, which made possible fuller protection from the air. At the same time small aircraft carriers and additional escorts began to accompany some convoys, while a highly efficient control organisation—the Area Combined Headquarters at Liverpool—in which naval and air staffs worked side by side, was keyed to full pitch.

The land planes and flying boats of **Coastal Command** were now operating to the limit of their various ranges and endurance in order to give the maximum possible protection to threatened convoys. Sorties averaged from ten hours in the case of Wellingtons to seventeen with the VLR \* Liberators and even longer with Catalinas. The patrols they flew were of three main types. First, there was the 'close escort' during which the aircraft, after meeting the convoy and exchanging recognition signals, remained in its vicinity, carrying out searches on the orders of the senior naval officer on one of the escort vessels. Second, there were offensive patrols sweeping on parallel tracks over the convoy's path and along its flanks. These patrols were timed so that some aircraft reached the ships at dawn, while relieving aircraft later in the day flew beyond the convoy, returning over or near it about dusk, the U-boat's favourite hour for attack. Many sightings and attacks

resulted from these tactics. Sometimes it was a shadowing U-boat that was depth-charged from the air.



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\* Very long range. They carried minimum armament, fewer depth-charges, and extra fuel.

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At other times it was a pack gathering for the assault. Several times U-boats were sunk as a result of close co-operation between aircraft and the surface vessels of the escort, signals being exchanged by radio-telephone or, when radio silence was essential, by Aldis lamp.

The third type of air patrol was the independent hunt over areas of the ocean where U-boats were known to be lurking, their presence having been discovered by sightings or by the interception of their radio transmissions. The information collected from such sources was sent to the operational units so that crews could be briefed before setting out on their missions.

The month of February 1943, when sixty-three ships were lost, saw bitter and prolonged engagements between the U-boat packs and the air and surface escorts. An example of the growing value of air support occurred during the passage of one convoy of sixty-four ships which left

**New York for the United Kingdom on 25 January. Air cover from West Atlantic bases was provided for the first week of the voyage, which was uneventful. On the morning of 4 February the ships were sighted by a patrolling U-boat, a pack assembled, and during the next two days five vessels were lost. One U-boat was sunk in counter-attacks by the surface escorts. From the morning of the 6th, in spite of rough weather, which at one time caused the convoy to be spread over fifty square miles of ocean, the maximum possible air cover was provided from bases in Iceland and later from the United Kingdom. Ten U-boats were sighted and depth-charged from the air during the following forty-eight hours, one being sunk outright. Thereafter no further attacks were made on the ships, which reached port four days later.**

**The first aircraft to reach the convoy on the 6th was a Liberator from Iceland with Sergeant H. J. Bennett,<sup>6</sup> as pilot, and Sergeant V. B. McKeague<sup>7</sup>, navigator. Three U-boats were attacked during their close escort patrols, the aircraft remaining with the ships for seven hours at a distance of more than eight hundred miles from its base. The following morning Sergeant W. M. Easton<sup>8</sup> was with a Fortress from a base in the Hebrides which attacked a U-boat near the same convoy. Rain and low cloud enabled the aircraft to achieve complete surprise as the four lookouts were seen in the conning tower as the depth-charges fell. Their explosions engulfed the U-boat, which disappeared leaving a large patch of oil on the surface. On the same day Flying Officer B. W. Turnbull,<sup>9</sup> as captain of a Liberator from Iceland, attacked a German submarine sighted right in the path of this convoy, about thirty miles in front of the leading ships. A few months later Turnbull completely destroyed another U-boat in the same area, under similar circumstances. After the explosions of the depth-charges had subsided the German submarine was seen to break in half. The bow and stern both rose well out of the sea and then sank inwards almost vertically. Subsequently some thirty of the crew were seen amidst wreckage.**

**During these months New Zealand airmen were involved in a number of similar episodes. One of them, Flight Sergeant J. D. Ackerman,<sup>10</sup> was**

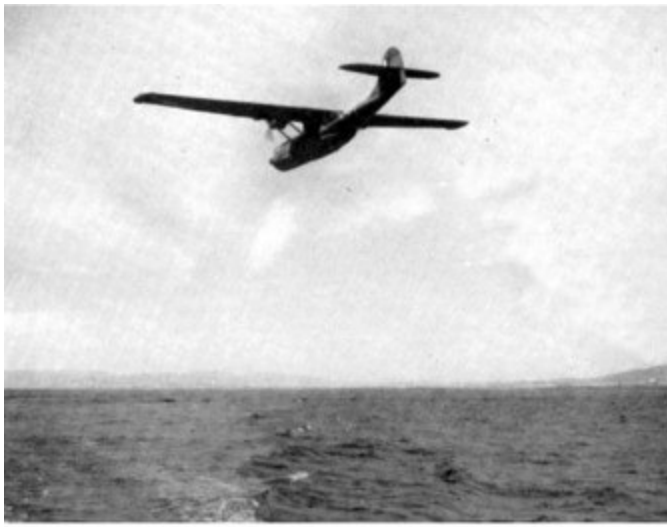
**navigator of a Fortress which sank two U-boats within a few weeks. The second success was scored in the middle of March when heavy air protection was provided for two inward-bound convoys routed close together. They were attacked by a pack of some forty U-boats. Thirteen vessels had been sunk during one day while the ships were outside the range of air cover. The surface escorts, hopelessly outnumbered, were unable to repel the mass attacks which took place. The next day every long-range aircraft that could be spared joined in the battle. Nineteen attacks resulted and finally the enemy's effort was broken. This was achieved not so much by the few definite kills as by the density of the air cover provided and the close co-operation between the surface vessels and aircraft protecting the ships.**



**WELLINGTON**

**WELLINGTON**



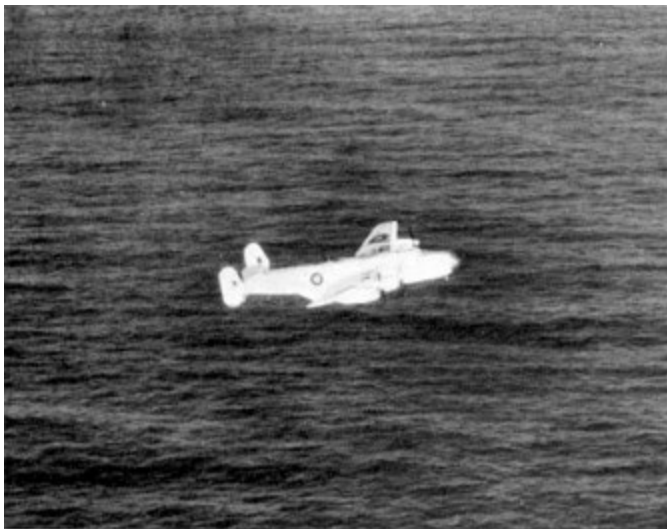


CATALINA

CATALINA



LIBERATOR  
LIBERATOR



HALIFAX  
HALIFAX



**FORTRESS**  
**FORTRESS**



THE AIRSTRIP *Gibraltar*

**THE AIRSTRIP *Gibraltar***

U-BOAT BEACHED *near Oran*



**U-BOAT BEACHED *near Oran***



NORTH AFRICAN CONVOY

**NORTH AFRICAN CONVOY**



IN THE OPERATIONS ROOM  
AT AREA COMBINED  
HEADQUARTERS, *Liverpool*

**IN THE OPERATIONS ROOM AT AREA COMBINED HEADQUARTERS, *Liverpool***

***Aircrew & Ground Staff***



**No. 490 SQUADRON GROUP, July 1943**

*Jui, West Africa*

**The aircraft is a Catalina**



*(Left)* WING COMMANDER M. A. ENSOR, DSO and bar, DFC and bar  
*(Right)* GROUP CAPTAIN A. E. CLOUSTON, DSO, DFC, AFC and bar

**( Left) WING COMMANDER M. A. ENSOR, DSO and bar, DFC and bar**

**( Right) GROUP CAPTAIN A. E. CLOUSTON, DSO, DFC, AFC and bar**



**FLYING OFFICER TRIGG, VC, DFC**



**WAIST GUNNER, COASTAL COMMAND LIBERATOR**  
**WAIST GUNNER, COASTAL COMMAND LIBERATOR**



**HUDSONS LEAVING ON PATROL *Iceland***  
**HUDSONS LEAVING ON PATROL *Iceland***



MAINTENANCE BASE *Jui, West Africa*



MAINTENANCE BASE *Jui, West Africa*

LOADING DEPTH-  
CHARGES INTO A  
LIBERATOR

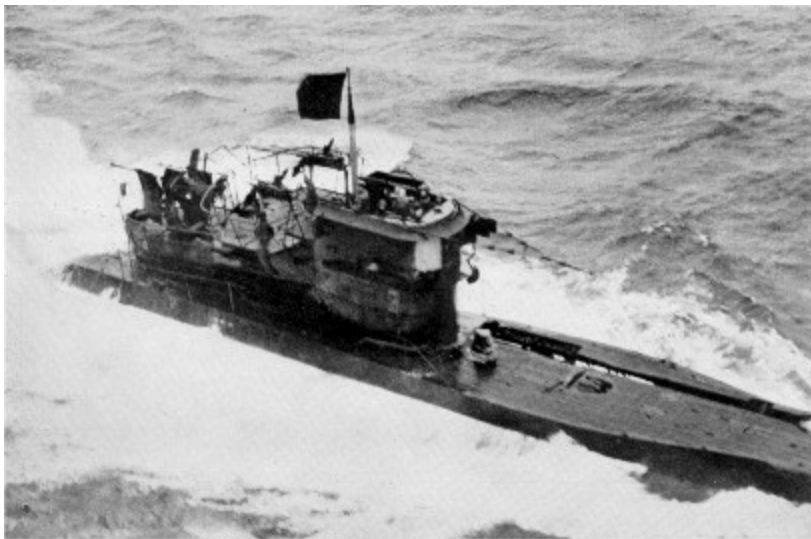


LOADING DEPTH-CHARGES INTO A LIBERATOR

COASTAL COMMAND LIBERATOR ABOUT TO DROP A SMOKE-FLOAT as a navigational aid for ocean flying. A back bearing taken on this marker enabled the navigator to check his drift.



**COASTAL COMMAND LIBERATOR ABOUT TO DROP A SMOKE-FLOAT as a navigational aid for ocean flying. A back bearing taken on this marker enabled the navigator to check his drift**



U-BOAT SURRENDERING. Note Schnorkel device on the fore-deck.

**U-BOAT SURRENDERING. Note Schnorkel device on the fore-deck**



**FIVE GERMAN SUBMARINE OFFICERS AFTER THE SURRENDER OF U-BOAT 249**  
The Commander wears a white cap

**During March 1943, 108 ships totalling 627,000 tons were lost. In the following month the losses fell to fifty-six vessels of 328,000 tons, and by the middle of May it was clear that the tide of battle in the **North Atlantic** was turning in favour of the Allies. Sixteen U-boats had been sunk during April and, in addition, the constant harassing from the air was having its effect. No longer could the enemy submarines approach convoys and remain immune from counter-attack. The time when one U-boat could remain on the surface shadowing a convoy, while it ‘homed’ others to from a pack, was passing. The assembling packs were broken up and forced under by the air patrols, often many miles from the ships, while the shadower itself was on several occasions destroyed before it could even begin transmission. Towards the end of May a slow convoy of thirty-seven ships crossed the **North Atlantic** without the loss of a single vessel, although trailed throughout most of its passage by a large group of German submarines.**

**‘It is more and more difficult for the U-boats to attack convoys,’ declared Admiral Lutzow about this time. ‘The increased air support given to the Allied ships has neutralised the U-boat's most powerful weapon— invisibility.’**

**The lull which followed meant that the air patrols in the **North****



**Atlantic** became very monotonous. Indeed, even during the months when U-boat activity was at its peak in that region, many airmen flew hundreds of hours without sighting an enemy. This applied particularly to those engaged in covering areas closer to the **British Isles**.

Nevertheless, their presence over these waters ensured the safe passage of shipping in the Western Approaches, which, two years earlier, had been the scene of very heavy sinkings.

Their patrols, so often lacking in incident, and frequently flown in vile weather, demanded quiet courage, endless patience, and constant vigilance. The pilots, particularly those in the flying boats, had to possess many of the qualities of the sailor. Indeed, from the earliest days of their training they were brought into close association with the **Royal Navy**. Tactical exercises with ships and submarines helped to develop the technique of co-operation and to give the pilots a knowledge of the vessels they were likely to encounter. In addition, the pilot who was captain of an aircraft had to weld his crew into a team, and he had to know something of the work of each man in the crew. \* On days when they were not flying he would get his men together, and in a corner of the mess or huddling round the old iron stove in a Nissen hut, they would discuss tactics and difficulties. In this way good teamwork was achieved and, in most crews, men came to know a great deal of each other's work, so that in an emergency they could undertake another's job as well as their own.

There are no landmarks five hundred miles out in the **Atlantic** and the crews flying patrols over that ocean saw no land of any kind for most of their flight. They had to find their way, relying on instruments for their guidance, over vast spaces, marked only by the changing lanes traced upon the surface by the wind. The navigator was thus a most important member of each crew. The problems which faced him literally changed with the changing winds. His fast-moving craft was not travelling in an element whose tides and currents have been known, charted, and set down in tables for many years. He was forced to rely upon weather reports and forecasts. In spite of the splendid service

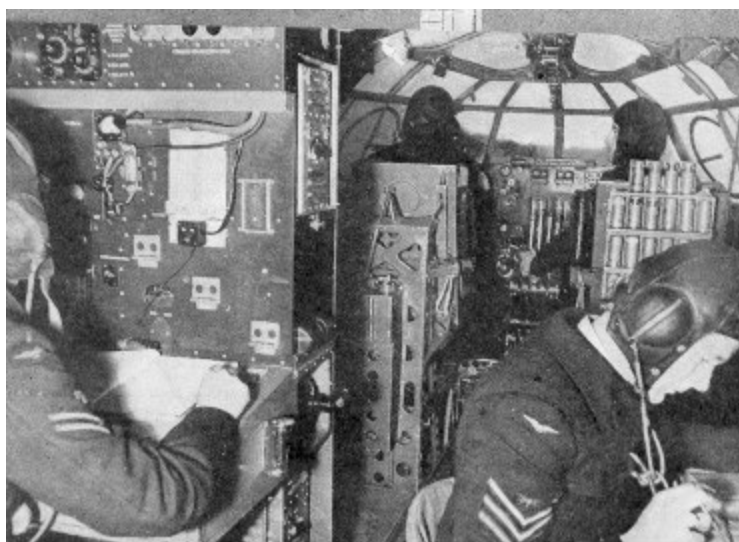
provided by the 'met' men, changes in the direction and speed of the wind in the areas through which his machine had to fly could not always be calculated accurately in advance.

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\* In the aircraft engaged on **Atlantic** patrols the crew included two pilots, one navigator, three or four wireless operator-air gunners, and a flight engineer.

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In the early years, each flight was a navigational adventure. Later, as wireless and radar aids were developed and astro-navigation more widely used, the task of the navigator was made somewhat easier. But the greater distances then flown still made his work very exacting, as he had no relief throughout a flight. In a Catalina, for example, he might be continuously engaged at his job, in cramped conditions, for upwards of twenty hours without a break. It was also the navigator's duty to keep an accurate log of each flight. As well as recording every alteration of course and every calculation of drift, the log included the text of all messages sent and received, all sightings of ships and other aircraft, with appropriate details. Weather observations were also made, usually at the western extremity of the patrol. These meteorological reports took the place of the peacetime reports from ships, now forced to remain silent. They contributed much to the successful planning of operations, naval and military as well as air.



ON PATROL. Navigator, wireless operator, first and second pilots

**ON PATROL Navigator, wireless operator, first and second pilots**

The work of the navigator was supplemented by that of the wireless operator-air gunners, who interchanged their duties to afford some relief on long patrols. As radar sets were fitted to anti-submarine aircraft, these men specialised in operating them, although in the course of a patrol most members of a crew would take turns of duty at the set—the ‘magic eye’ which revealed, beyond visual range, the presence of objects on the surface of the sea. The work of an air gunner remained important, even in areas where enemy aircraft were not likely to be encountered. His duty then was to watch continuously the surface of the sea within his field of vision and to report anything he sighted. Ships straggling from convoy, lifeboats or rafts containing survivors from torpedoed ships, were sometimes discovered as a result of his vigilance. The wireless operator, on the other hand, saw little of what occurred outside his aircraft. Crouched over his radio, he remained alert, ready to transmit an emergency sighting report or to receive messages which might lead to a change of patrol, a diversion to assist in a search or attack, or instructions to land at a different base because of deteriorating weather at the home airfield. There were occasions when it was entirely due to his alertness that a faint SOS was received from a lifeboat's weak transmitter or from another aircraft about to land in the sea. In the larger aircraft another important member of the crew was the engineer whose duty was to watch the behaviour of the engines, to check cylinder temperatures, oil pressures, and petrol consumption. He also kept a record of each patrol so that any fault could be dealt with speedily by the maintenance staff on return.

Thus each member of a crew had his allotted task and every patrol successfully completed was the result of efficient co-operation in carrying out these duties. While many flights involved little incident there was always a report to be made on landing. If there had been an encounter with the enemy or if anything unusual had occurred, each member of the crew was called upon to give details as he had seen them. When the interrogation was completed and the meteorological officer

had received his report, along with some good-natured chaff about his forecast, the weary crew made their way to their billets for a few hours' rest. Later they might be found round an old piano in the mess singing together one of the many songs which by this time had become popular throughout the Command. One of the best known was the 'Coastal Anthem', the words of which, though often varied, went something like this:

**We've flown the North Atlantic,  
Till it made us almost weep.  
The sea was ruddy wet,  
Ruddy cold and ruddy deep.**

**We've been flying all day long,  
At a hundred ruddy feet.  
The weather was ruddy awful,  
Driving rain and blinding sleet.**

**We've flown on every compass course,  
From South to ruddy North,  
And we made a ruddy landfall,  
In the Firth of ruddy Forth.**

\* \* \*

# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## HUNTING U-BOATS IN THE BAY OF BISCAY

# HUNTING U-BOATS IN THE BAY OF BISCAY



**FOR THE GREATER PART** of the war, the main operational bases for the German U-boats were situated in the French Atlantic ports where, sheltered beneath many feet of concrete, they were immune from bombing attacks. But to reach the Allied shipping lanes from these bases they had to cross the Bay of Biscay. By the middle of August 1943 they were managing this only by remaining submerged throughout almost the whole passage and by creeping in and out close to the north-west corner of **Spain**, thus keeping as far as possible from the air patrols flown from the south-west of England. They had good reason to do so since, during the previous three months, twenty-seven U-boats had been sunk in the Bay area, twenty-four of them by air attack.

But this destruction and the crippling restriction of their movements had only been achieved as a result of sustained efforts begun two years earlier. During most of this time it had been an unrewarding task for the aircrew concerned, involving much flying with not even the meeting of a convoy to break the monotony. After some four or five hours in the air, they might catch a glimpse of the north coast of **Spain** before turning to commence the return flight northwards. Towards the middle of 1942, when their efforts were rewarded by an increase in the number of sightings and attacks, the enemy countered the type of airborne radar then in use by fitting U-boats with a 'search receiver' so that they could detect approaching aircraft and evade them by diving. The result was

that in spite of much patient and enduring effort, this campaign against the U-boats in transit did not really become effective until early in 1943. By then, the introduction of improved radar and the provision of additional Leigh Light aircraft made possible more frequent patrols by



LEIGH LIGHT FITTED TO WING OF LIBERATOR

night as well as by day, which gave the U-boats little respite during their passage. The chances of catching them on the surface were further increased by the careful selection of patrol areas after sightings or on the receipt of information from other sources.

New Zealand airmen had taken part in this campaign from the outset, flying with the Sunderlands, Wellingtons, Whitleys, and Hudsons on patrols planned by the Area Combined Headquarters of **Plymouth**. During the first part of 1942, No. 489 (NZ) Squadron, was employed for a time on Biscay patrols, and it was during one of these sorties that serious action was first joined with the enemy by this unit. This was on 13 June, when a Hampden piloted by Flight Lieutenant R. G. Hartshorn<sup>11</sup> beat off attacks by two German fighters whilst returning from an anti-submarine patrol. Several New Zealanders also flew with the first Wellington squadron to be equipped with the Leigh Light for night attacks in the Bay of Biscay. This two-million-candlepower searchlight, so named after the officer responsible for its development, was fitted in the under-turret of the aircraft. With pilot and radar operator working

together it was possible to locate and home on to surfaced U-boats at night; then, at a range of approximately one mile, the searchlight would be switched on to illuminate the target, which could be attacked as by day. The Leigh Light, in a modified form, was later fitted to Liberators and Catalinas.

March to August 1943 saw the climax of the Biscay campaign. In the former month, the Leigh Light Wellingtons, many of which had now been fitted with improved radar, had considerable success. A typical attack was that made by Flying Officer W. Lewis <sup>12</sup> as captain of one of these aircraft, on the night of 24-25 March. His crew of five included four other New Zealanders. They were nearing the end of the southward leg of their patrol when a radar contact indicated a possible target ten miles to starboard. Lewis immediately turned and homed on the contact, losing height at the same time. When the radar operator called the range as just under one mile, the Leigh Light was switched on. It lit up a fully-surfaced U-boat dead ahead. Six depth-charges were dropped near the vessel, which appeared to heel over on its side, but nothing further was seen. However, although it was disappointing for the crews of the Leigh Light aircraft not to be able to see the results of their attacks, their efforts were soon rewarded. Towards the end of April, U-boats began to appear on the surface by day rather than face the sudden and unexpected attacks in darkness. They also began to carry increased armament to drive off aircraft that surprised them, or at least to upset the accuracy of the attacks. Although some aircraft were shot down and others damaged, \* the density of the patrols was now such that an increasing toll was taken of the enemy. The duels which occurred gave the air gunners many opportunities to prove their skill. By directing a hail of fire at the gun positions on the conning tower as the aircraft went in to attack, they enabled their captains to aim the depth-charges with a minimum of interference. On one occasion a Sunderland sighted a U-boat, which opened fire and zig-zagged as the aircraft approached. The front gunner, Flight Sergeant R. C. Armstrong, <sup>13</sup> directed his fire with such good effect that several of the enemy gunners were seen to crumple. The flak slackened and his captain was able to take accurate



aim. The U-boat shuddered violently as the depth-charges exploded and soon afterwards it sank, leaving a large patch of oil on the sea in which about thirty of the crew were seen.

Sometimes both hunter and hunted perished, as when a Wellington crashed on the deck of a 1600-ton supply U-boat during its attack. The U-boat was sighted and sunk half an hour later by another Wellington captained by Flying Officer J. Whyte.<sup>14</sup> He also found the sole survivor from the first aircraft in a small dinghy a few miles from the scene. Supplies were dropped to him and the position reported so that both he and the survivors from the U-boat were subsequently rescued.

Towards the end of June 1943. new tactics were adopted by the enemy to counter the air offensive. His outward-bound submarines began to cross the Bay in small groups in order to give mutual anti-aircraft support. One of the first sightings of such a group was made by was made by a Liberator captained by Flight Sergeant W. Anderson.<sup>15</sup> During its approach the aircraft was heavily hit by concentrated cannon and machine-gun fire from three submarines travelling in V formation. One member of the crew was seriously wounded and large holes were torn in the fuselage and one wing. Nevertheless, in a second attempt, Anderson succeeded in depth-charging a U-boat on the outside of the formation. The other two then dived, leaving the third damaged and wallowing on the surface.

About the same time more fighters were sent by the enemy to intercept the anti-submarine aircraft. They flew in formations averaging from five to eight, and achieved some success until methods were devised of warning aircraft on patrol of their approach and patrols by British fighters were increased. Meanwhile, there were some spirited engagements in which the enemy fighters were not always successful. One Sunderland managed to beat off repeated attacks by eight Junkers 88, destroying three of them. On another occasion a Liberator returning from



JUNKERS 88 GOES DOWN IN FLAMES OVER THE BAY OF BISCAY

JUNKERS 88 GOES DOWN IN FLAMES OVER THE BAY OF BISCAY

patrol was attacked by five Messerschmitts. They were driven off, two being damaged, while a third was seen to crash into the sea. The Liberator, with two of its engines damaged and holes torn in the fuselage, just managed to reach its base. All four of its gunners were New Zealanders— Flight Sergeants F. E. Bailey,<sup>16</sup> I. R. Heays,<sup>17</sup> H. J. Mills,<sup>18</sup> and I. R. Thompson.<sup>19</sup> Heays was badly wounded and died later in hospital.

In spite of these new tactics by the enemy, July 1943 was a disastrous month for his U-boats, no fewer than twelve being sunk in the Bay area alone. The Leigh Light Wellingtons continued to maintain the pressure by night with good effect. Some of them were now flying on to Gibraltar, while a detachment there was flying patrols to the north-west to link up with those flown from the **United Kingdom**. Towards the end of the month Flight Sergeant D. E. McKenzie<sup>20</sup> had the experience of taking part in three night attacks within a fortnight. On the third occasion the U-boat was so damaged that it had to be towed into a Spanish port. Of the daylight attacks in which New Zealanders took part during the same period, one of the most successful was made by Wing Commander A. E. Clouston,<sup>21</sup> who after a distinguished career in experimental flying had come to **Coastal Command** a few months before to take charge of a Liberator squadron based in **Cornwall**.

In his unit were many New Zealanders, both on the ground as well as in the air. One of the flight commanders was Squadron Leader M. A. Ensor, an outstanding figure in **Coastal Command**. In 1945, when Ensor was awarded a bar to his DSO, the official citation stated that, in addition to a fine operational career, 'He had contributed much to the development of new and successful methods of attacking enemy submarines'.

In August 1943, after a week in which nine U-boats were sunk in the Biscay area, there was a considerable reduction in the traffic across the Bay, and during the following months the enemy showed little inclination to restore it. Instead, he kept many of his submarines in port for re-equipment with the Schnorkel device with which he hoped to operate them successfully against the Allied invasion armadas. Those that made the passage hugged the north coast of **Spain** more closely than before, sometimes even within the limit of Spanish territorial waters, an area crowded with fishing craft which made their detection very difficult.

But the hard-won advantage that had been gained by the aircrews was not allowed to slip from their grasp. The Bay patrols were continued relentlessly both by day and by night and any U-boats sighted were hunted to exhaustion.



GERMAN U-BOAT

GERMAN U-BOAT

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\* A Sunderland flying boat was so badly holed in one encounter that it was forced to land in a ploughed field, a feat that was achieved without injuring the crew.

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# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

WEST AFRICA AND NO. 490 (NZ) SQUADRON

## **WEST AFRICA and No. 490 (NZ) SQUADRON**

**THE OPERATIONS** begun in May 1941, which drove his U-boats away from the British coasts, led the enemy to seek farther afield for weak spots in the defence of Allied merchant shipping. At that time such places were not difficult to find, and off **Freetown** a group of six U-boats sank no fewer than thirty-two ships during the next month. But thereafter, as air bases were established and surface escorts increased, the sinkings diminished steadily, until by 1943 they were almost negligible. Continued air patrols were necessary to prevent their recurrence, although this routine defensive work, in an area far removed from the main centres of the war, proved irksome and monotonous.

New Zealanders had taken a prominent part in the establishment of the first base for anti-submarine aircraft in **West Africa**. When the first three Sunderlands left the **United Kingdom** to fly to **Freetown** and form No. 95 Squadron, two of them were piloted by Flight Lieutenant C. E. W. Evison <sup>22</sup> and Flying Officer S. G. Baggott. <sup>23</sup> Another New Zealand pilot, Flight Lieutenant T. P. Gibson, <sup>24</sup> sailed in charge of the first ground party. All three had flown Sunderlands over the Western Approaches from the early days of the war. Subsequently Evison was to command the squadron and Baggott to become a flight commander. Another RAF Sunderland squadron sent to **West Africa** was commanded for a time by Wing Commander H.J.L. Hawkins <sup>25</sup> and then by Wing Commander A. Frame. <sup>26</sup>

During 1943 about seventy New Zealanders served with the squadrons based in **West Africa**, the majority with No. 490 (NZ) Squadron although each of the **RAF** units along the coast had its small group of men from the Dominion. The patrols then flown by these squadrons practically closed the gap on the shipping route from Gibraltar to the Cape. Convoys were met as they entered the area and escorted by relays of aircraft from base to base along the coast. In addition, offensive sorties were flown against U-boats patrolling in the area or in transit to the Indian Ocean, and searches were made for survivors from torpedoed

vessels. But the U-boats, captained by experienced officers, were operating with great caution on the fringe of the area swept by the air patrols. Consequently most of these patrols were without incident, and the routine flying over the sea did little to relieve the boredom of life in isolated tropical bases. The climate was unhealthy and treacherous, sudden storms of great violence being frequent at certain seasons of the year.

Jui, the base near **Freetown** from which No. 490 Squadron began operations at the beginning of July 1943, was not a particularly pleasant spot. The name itself meant 'swamp of death'. The station was built on a low spur running out into an estuary where the Catalina flying boats were moored. Surrounding it were dense, steamy, mangrove swamps while farther back were high hills which cut off the sea breezes that would have freshened the heavy, stagnant atmosphere. The humidity, especially in the wet season, was excessive.

No. 490 Squadron had begun to form at Stranraer, on the west coast of **Scotland**, at the end of March 1943, under Wing Commander D. W. Baird.<sup>27</sup> The first three crews had already arrived and others followed during the next two months. Among them were several New Zealanders who had already distinguished themselves in operations with **Coastal Command**. One was Flight Lieutenant P. R. Godby,<sup>28</sup> who had flown Ansons during the early days of the war with No. 48 Squadron. Others were Flight Lieutenant A. Frame, who had operated with a Sunderland squadron from Oban at the same time, and Flight Lieutenant A. M. Foster,<sup>29</sup> who had been with the Fleet Air Arm at the outbreak of war. A few New Zealanders came from Bomber Command.

The squadron's Catalinas were named after the New Zealand provinces and the first two aircraft, piloted by Wing Commander Baird and Flying Officer H. K. Patience,<sup>30</sup> flew to West **Africa** in the middle of June, the others following during the next few weeks. Operations were begun at once and before long the squadron had achieved an enviable reputation for good serviceability and general efficiency which it maintained throughout its sojourn in **West Africa** to the end of the war,

in spite of the fact that most of its later work, under Wing Commander B. S. Nicholl,<sup>31</sup> was exacting and very monotonous.

During August 1943 there were several incidents off the West African coast in which New Zealanders played a prominent part. The first was the rescue of survivors from the merchant ship *Fernhill*, torpedoed 400 miles off **Freetown** at midnight on 6 August. Flying Officer R. M. Grant<sup>32</sup> was captain of the Catalina from No. 490 Squadron which set out upon receipt of the vessel's distress signal. Within five minutes of reaching the reported position, two lifeboats and three rafts were sighted, containing thirty-nine survivors. Emergency packs, a wireless transmitter, and a bundle of clothing were dropped to them, the clothing being supplied by the aircrew from what they were wearing at the time. It was a nearly naked crew that returned to base after remaining with the survivors for five hours. As a result of their messages a corvette had been directed to the rescue, but before it reached the survivors, Flying Officer N. A. Ward,<sup>33</sup> flying another 490 Squadron Catalina, had succeeded in leading a merchant ship to the scene to pick them up. This vessel was then escorted to port by a third Catalina from the same squadron.

A few days later, on 11 August, Ward attacked a German U-boat. He was flying as second pilot to his squadron commander and happened to be at the controls when the U-boat was sighted three miles away. It was only just visible in the fairly heavy sea that was running. The Catalina immediately went in to attack, dropping four depth-charges. These fell slightly astern of the submarine, causing its bows to rise out of the water and remain so for a short time. After turning in small circles, as if its steering had been damaged, and exchanging fire with the Catalina, the U-boat finally submerged. A fifth depth-charge unfortunately failed to release during the attack. However, considerable consolation was derived from the fact that it also held fast during landing.

On the same day and about the same hour, Flying Officer L. A. Trigg<sup>34</sup> made a most gallant attack on another U-boat about ninety miles

farther north. It was his first operational sortie in a Liberator aircraft. His unit, No. 200 Squadron, was only in process of converting from Hudsons to the new type of aircraft, but as several U-boats were known to be in the area, it was essential that a Liberator be despatched on patrol that morning. The aircraft took off from Rufisque, near Dakar, shortly after dawn. Four hours later a surfaced U-boat was sighted and Trigg prepared to attack. The enemy submarine did not attempt to submerge. Instead it engaged the Liberator with its anti-aircraft guns, scoring repeated hits and setting the aircraft on fire during its approach. Trigg continued with his run in and made such an accurate attack that the U-boat sank a few minutes later. Unfortunately, immediately after making the attack, the Liberator crashed into the sea. There were no survivors.

When the aircraft failed to return to its base, a search was organised, and during the next afternoon a Sunderland sighted a dinghy containing several men who were reported as survivors from the missing Liberator. It was not until a naval vessel reached the scene on the following morning that the occupants of the dinghy were found to be seven Germans, the only survivors from the U-boat. By a strange irony of fate the dinghy was one which had floated free from the Liberator at the moment of the crash. It had been found and inflated by one of the Germans half an hour after the U-boat sank. Among the survivors was the U-boat commander, who expressed sincere admiration of the pilot's courage in not allowing the submarine's heavy and accurate fire and the precarious condition of his aircraft to deter him from pressing home his attack.

'We sighted an aircraft and engaged it with all our guns,' he declared. 'As the machine was coming in to attack, it was hit and set on fire. Although his plane was well alight the pilot continued the attack, releasing his depth-charges from a height of fifteen metres. We could see our fire entering through its open bomb doors as the aircraft passed over us. Then the depth-charges burst near the submarine and I momentarily lost sight of the machine. However, I recovered from the shock in time



to observe it dive straight into the sea.'

Flying Officer Trigg was awarded the Victoria Cross posthumously. Only a few weeks earlier he had received the Distinguished Flying Cross for two skilful attacks against U-boats whilst protecting a West African convoy in March 1943.

The members of his crew who perished with him were Flying Officer J. J. Townshend, of Stroud, Gloucestershire, Pilot Officer G. N. Goodwin, of Vresto, British Columbia, Flight Sergeant R. Bonnick, of Hendon, **London**, and four New Zealanders, Flying Officer I. Marinovich,<sup>35</sup> Flight Sergeant A. G. Bennett,<sup>36</sup> Flight Sergeant L. J. Frost,<sup>37</sup> and Flight Sergeant T. J. Soper.<sup>38</sup>

\* \* \*

In this brief account it has only been possible to mention the names of a few of the New Zealanders who flew with the anti-submarine squadrons in the Battle of the **Atlantic**, and the incidents described represent only the highlights of the struggle. It must be emphasised that most of the work done by the aircrews of **Coastal Command** was long, dull, hard, and drudging toil, lightened by only occasional flashes of combat and sudden attack. Many men flew hundreds of hours on reconnaissance, on anti-submarine patrols and convoy escorts, with never an enemy sighting. Through fine weather and foul, by day and by night, the patrols went relentlessly on. Crews weary from hours of buffeting with storms, hundreds of miles from land, would return to their bases to meet others going out to face the same storms. They were partners, in a grim struggle against a determined enemy, with the men of the Allied merchant and naval vessels, without whose sacrifices and devotion to duty the U-boats would not have been beaten. Only as a result of the combined effort were the sea routes kept open and the invasion of the Continent and final victory made possible.

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## [BACKMATTER]

**THE AUTHOR, H. L. Thompson**, a graduate of the University of New Zealand, served with the Intelligence Branch of the **Royal Air Force** during the war. He was for some time lecturer in English and History at the Borough Polytechnic, **London**.

### ***TOTAL GERMAN U-BOAT CASUALTIES*** \*

<b>Cause</b>	<b>1939-40</b>	<b>1941</b>	<b>1942</b>	<b>1943</b>	<b>1944</b>	<b>1945</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>SHIP</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>68</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>246</b>
<b>AIRCRAFT</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>141</b>	<b>92</b>	<b>78</b>	<b>353 †</b>
<b>SHIP AND AIRCRAFT</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>47</b>
<b>SUBMARINES</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>MINES</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>OTHER CAUSES</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>82</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>85</b>	<b>237</b>	<b>240</b>	<b>153</b>	<b>781</b>

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\* **Includes U-boat casualties effected by all the Allied Nations.**

† **Includes 63 destroyed in Allied bombing raids.**

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# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

### *BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES*

<sup>1</sup>Flight Lieutenant H. A. POOLE, DFC; **Invercargill**; born **Invercargill**, 6 Mar 1920; clerk; joined **RNZAF** Feb 1940.

<sup>2</sup>Squadron Leader H. G. HOLMES, DFC and bar; **England**; born **Rangiora**, 31 Aug 1916; storekeeper; joined **RAF** Jun 1939.

<sup>3</sup>Squadron Leader I. C. PATTERSON, DSO, m.i.d.; **Auckland**; born **Auckland**, 19 Aug 1917; electrical engineer; joined **RAF** Mar 1939; **Tasman Empire Airways** 1944-.

<sup>4</sup>Flight Lieutenant I. R. MITCHELL, DFC; **RNZAF Station**, **Wigram**; born **Napier**, 24 Jun 1916; sheep farmer; joined **RNZAF** Dec 1940.

<sup>5</sup>Wing Commander M. A. ENSOR, DSO and bar, DFC and bar; **Manuka Bay**, **Cheviot**; born **Rangiora**, 5 Jan 1922; shepherd; joined **RNZAF** Jul 1940.

<sup>6</sup>Flying Officer H. J. BENNETT; born **Tuatapere**, **Southland**, 11 Oct 1915; farmer; joined **RNZAF** Aug 1941; killed on air operations, 3 Feb 1945.

<sup>7</sup>Warrant Officer V. B. Mc KEAGUE; **Christchurch**; born **Timaru**, 27 Jan 1910; clerk; joined **RNZAF** Dec 1940.

<sup>8</sup>Warrant Officer W. M. EATSON; **Levin**; born **Wellington**, 27 Dec 1918; factory hand; joined **RNZAF** Jul 1940.

<sup>9</sup>Flying Officer B. W. TURNBULL, DFC; **Hedgehope**, **Southland**; born **Wellington**, 11 Jul 1915; company secretary; joined **RNZAF** Jan 1940.

<sup>10</sup>Squadron Leader J. D. ACKERMAN, MBE, m.i.d.; **RAF**; born **Masterton**, 6 Jul 1921; civil servant; joined **RNZAF** Oct 1940.

<sup>11</sup>Squadron Leader R. G. HARTSHORN, m.i.d.; **Auckland**; born **Hastings**, 13

**Dec 1919; bank clerk; joined RNZAF Nov 1940.**

**<sup>12</sup>Flight Lieutenant W. LEWIS, DFC; Wellington; born Wellington, 25 Feb 1922; salesman; joined RNZAF May 1941.**

**<sup>13</sup>Flight Sergeant R. C. ARMSTRONG; born Te Kuiti, 19 Oct 1911; labourer; joined RNZAF Dec 1940; killed on air operations, 12 Jul 1943.**

**<sup>14</sup>Flying Officer J. WHYTE; born Scotland, 6 Sep 1917; clerk; joined RNZAF Jul 1941; killed on air operations, 15 Aug 1943.**

**<sup>15</sup>Flying Officer W. ANDERSON, DFC; Wellington; born Aberdeen, 1 Mar 1920; clerk; joined RNZAF Mar 1941.**

**<sup>16</sup>Flying Officer F. E. BAILEY, DFC; Blenheim; born Blenheim, 13 Feb 1910; carpenter; joined RNZAF Nov 1941.**

**<sup>17</sup>Flight Sergeant I. R. HEAYS; born Napier, 7 Jul 1920; shepherd; joined RNZAF Oct 1941; died of wounds, 21 Sep 1943.**

**<sup>18</sup>Flying Officer H. J. MILLS, DFM; Gisborne; born Gisborne, 26 Dec 1921; railway porter; joined RNZAF Jan 1942.**

**<sup>19</sup>Warrant Officer I. R. THOMPSON, DFC; Christchurch; born Christchurch, 31 May 1921; miner; joined RNZAF Jun 1941; wounded 22 Sep 1943.**

**<sup>20</sup>Warrant Officer D. E. MC KENZIE, m.i.d.; Canada; born Kopuaranga, Masterton, 21 Apr 1922; farm hand; joined RNZAF Jun 1941.**

**<sup>21</sup>Group Captain A. E. CLOUSTON, DSO, DFC, AFC and bar, m.i.d.; RAF; England; born Motueka, 7 Apr 1908; sailor; joined RAF Oct 1930; commanded Coastal Command Squadron, 1942-44, and Coastal Command Station, 1944-45; OC Headquarters Flying Wing, Germany, 1945-47; RNZAF Station, Ohakea, 1947-49; 1 RAF Station, Leeming, 1950.**

**<sup>22</sup>Wing Commander C. E. W. EVISON, m.i.d.; Fiji; born Invercargill, 27 Mar 1916; draughting cadet; joined RAF Jan 1939.**

<sup>23</sup>Wing Commander S. G. BAGGOTT, DFC, m.i.d.; **RAF**; born **London**, 25 Nov 1916; civil servant; joined **RAF** Jun 1938; commanded 95 GR (Flying Boat) Sqn, **West Africa**, 1945.

<sup>24</sup>Wing Commander T. P. GIBSON, DFC; **RAF**; born **Christchurch**, 25 Oct 1913; survey cadet; joined **RAF** May 1938; CO New Camp, Gibraltar, 1945; Headquarters Coastal Command, 1949-.

<sup>25</sup>Wing Commander H. J. L. HAWKINS; **RAF**; born **New Plymouth**, 8 Dec 1905; clerk; joined **RAF** Jul 1930; commanded 204 (Flying Boat) Sqn, 1943-44; OC Headquarters unit, British Air Forces of Occupation, **Germany**, 1948-50.

<sup>26</sup>Wing Commander A. FRAME, DFC; **London**; born **Oamaru**, 6 Sep 1916; clerk; joined **RAF** Mar 1938.

<sup>27</sup>Wing Commander D. W. BAIRD, AFC; **RNZAF**; **London**; born Bangor, Northern Ireland, 23 Dec 1910; farmer; joined **RAF** Oct 1931; commanded **RNZAF** Fiji, 1940-41; 490 (NZ) Sqn, **West Africa**, 1943; **RNZAF** Station, **Ardmore**, 1945, and **Ohakea**, 1947.

<sup>28</sup>Wing Commander P. R. GODBY, m.i.d.; **RAF**; born **Christchurch**, 27 Aug 1914; journalist; joined **RAF** Mar 1939; Group Navigation Officer, British Air Forces of Occupation, **Germany**, 1949-.

<sup>29</sup>Squadron Leader A. M. FOSTER; **BOAC**, **England**; born **Blenheim**, 22 Jun 1917; clerk; joined **RAF** Aug 1938.

<sup>30</sup>Flight Lieutenant H. K. PATIENCE, AFC; **Auckland**; born **Wellington**, 6 Oct 1913; school teacher; joined **RNZAF** Apr 1941.

<sup>31</sup>Wing Commander B. S. NICHOLL; **RNZAF**; Air Department, **Wellington**; born **Christchurch**, 5 Dec 1906; journalist; joined **RAF** Jun 1931; commanded **RNZAF**, **Fiji**, Jan-Apr 1943; 490 (NZ) Sqn, **West Africa**, 1943-44; Director of Flying Training, Air Headquarters, **Wellington**, 1947-48; Deputy Director of Reserves, Air Department.

<sup>32</sup>Flying Officer R. M. GRANT, m.i.d.; born **Wellington**, 27 Jun 1920; bank clerk; joined **RNZAF** Jul 1941; killed on active service, 18 Nov 1943.

<sup>33</sup>Flight Lieutenant N. A. WARD, DFC; born **New Plymouth**; born **New Plymouth**, 16 May 1913; draper; joined **RNZAF** Apr 1940.

<sup>34</sup>Flying Officer L. A. TRIGG, VC, DFC; born Houhora, **Auckland**, 5 May 1914; salesman; joined **RNZAF** Jun 1941; killed on air operations, 11 Aug 1943.

<sup>35</sup>Flying Officer I. MARINOVICH; born Oratia, **Auckland**, 16 Mar 1917; orchardist; joined **RNZAF** May 1941; killed on air operations, 11 Aug 1943.

<sup>36</sup>Flight Sergeant A. G. BENNETT; born **Melbourne**, 27 Dec 1913; motor mechanic; joined **RNZAF** Jun 1941; killed on air operations, 11 Aug 1943.

<sup>37</sup>Flight Sergeant L. J. FROST; born **Auckland**, 9 Jul 1921; warehouse assistant; joined **RNZAF** Aug 1941; killed on air operations, 11 Aug 1943.

<sup>38</sup>Flight Sergeant T. J. SOPER; born **Richmond, Nelson**, 7 Jan 1922; taxi driver; joined **RNZAF** May 1941; killed on air operations, 11 Aug 1943.

The occupations given in each case are those on enlistment.

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NEW ZEALAND IN THE SECOND WORLD WAR  
Official History



### EARLY OPERATIONS WITH BOMBER COMMAND

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### EARLY OPERATIONS WITH BOMBER COMMAND

by

B. G. CLARE

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1992

# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## [FRONTISPIECE]



*Bomber Command Operations 1939-40*

COVER PHOTOGRAPH **Bombing up a Wellington**

**EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2**

**[TITLE PAGE]**

**EARLY OPERATIONS WITH BOMBER COMMAND**

**B. G. CLARE**

**WAR HISTORY BRANCH**

**DEPARTMENT OF INTERNAL AFFAIRS WELLINGTON, NEW ZEALAND**

**1950**

# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

[EDITORPAGE]

**IT IS THE INTENTION** *of this series to present aspects of New Zealand's part in the Second World War which will not receive detailed treatment in the campaign volumes and which are considered either worthy of special notice or typical of many phases of our war experience. The series is illustrated with material which would otherwise seldom see publication.*

**H. K. KIPPENBERGER**

,  
**Major-General**  
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

NEW ZEALAND WAR HISTORIES

# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## EARLY OPERATIONS WITH BOMBER COMMAND

### *Early Operations with Bomber Command*

# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## ATTACKS ON THE GERMAN FLEET

## **ATTACKS ON THE GERMAN FLEET**

**THE FIRST OFFENSIVE RAID** by the **Royal Air Force** was made on the afternoon of 4 September 1939. On that day men from the **British Isles, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and Eire** were among the crews of 15 **Blenheim** and 14 Wellington aircraft which took off from bases in England to attack units of the German Fleet. The weather over the North Sea was very bad and ten of the pilots were unable to see any target through the low cloud and driving rain.

The two New Zealanders who were in action on this historic day each had an eventful flight. Squadron Leader L. S. Lamb <sup>1</sup> was leader of a formation of Wellington bombers attacked by nine German fighters. Although two of the bombers were shot down before an escape could be made into cloud, Lamb's skilful leadership in the battle undoubtedly saved the lives of many in the formation.

The Wellington aircraft had been ordered to bomb two warships located at Brunsbuttel but only one aircraft found a target. The **Blenheims**, flown to the Schillig Roads, were more fortunate. The first formation found the German battleship *Admiral Scheer* and, bombing from masthead height, took the enemy completely by surprise. A second formation of five **Blenheims** attacking the *Admiral Scheer* fifteen minutes later found the crew of the battleship at action stations. The aircraft flew in almost at sea level, and as Sergeant M. H. S. Innes-Jones <sup>2</sup> watched—he was navigator and bomb-aimer of the fourth aircraft preparing to attack—the three **Blenheims** in front of him were each shot down in succession. As his captain approached the battleship, the fifth **Blenheim** passed and was destroyed. The aircraft in which the New Zealander was flying was the only one to pass through the withering fire from the warship and return to England. Sergeant Innes-Jones was responsible for the successful navigation of the aircraft during the long flight back across the North Sea.

Squadron Leader Lamb and Sergeant Innes-Jones were two of some five hundred New Zealanders who were serving in the **Royal Air Force** on



the outbreak of war. Most had made their own way to England—some as deck-hands, some as passengers—in the decade before the war and had been granted short-service commissions; others were trained and commissioned in New Zealand for service in the **RAF**, and a few had started their service careers as Aircraft Apprentices at the famous **RAF Technical College** at Halton, near **London**.

At the beginning of the Second World War British bombing policy was governed by the consideration that the less bombing there was the better. The Royal Air Force was not strong enough to provoke retaliation by the numerically superior **Luftwaffe**. The policy, therefore, was that only military objectives as then narrowly defined should be attacked, and the attack of 4 September 1939 was made in accordance with this direction.

At the beginning of the war much had still to be learned about the tactical use of a bomber force. It was later realised that bombing a warship from a low height could do little damage and was suicidal. It was soon apparent, also, that heavy casualties would be incurred if attacks were made in daylight on objectives strongly protected by shore-based fighters.

On 14 December 1939, for example, twelve Wellingtons were sent to search the Heligoland Bight for the German Fleet. The weather was extremely bad, with heavy rain and cloud to within a few hundred feet of the sea, but some warships were sighted. Then the fighters came. The rear flight, led by Flight Lieutenant E. J. Hetherington,<sup>3</sup> bore the brunt of the initial attack. His aircraft was hit and several of the crew wounded, but Hetherington managed to return to base, only to crash as he attempted to land. He and two of the crew were killed.

The air battle lasted for nearly an hour, continuous attacks being made on the formation from all sides. In the leading aircraft, piloted by Squadron Leader A. McKee,<sup>4</sup> the wireless operator, Corporal C. B. G. Knight,<sup>5</sup> coolly carried on with his work in spite of such continuous distractions as enemy tracer passing his window. As chief wireless

**operator for the formation he was responsible for obtaining valuable bearings on German wireless stations for navigational purposes and for passing messages to base, including the sighting reports of the German warships encountered. In this action five Wellingtons were lost and one was severely damaged. A few days later, twelve out of twenty-four Wellingtons were shot down in a similar engagement.**

**Thereafter daylight attacks on warships in the German North Sea bases were discontinued. Aircraft of Bomber Command continued to search the North Sea for German warships, but the weather was generally so bad that to find, much less attack, such tiny and elusive targets became almost impossible.**

# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## THE 'PHONY' WAR

## **THE 'PHONY' WAR**

**THE POLICY WHEREBY BOMBER COMMAND** was not permitted to drop bombs on other than military objectives—and even these targets could not be attacked if there was risk of injury to civilians—led the aircrews to agree with the American press in speaking of the 'Phony War'. Bomber Command was mainly engaged during this period in training and in making reconnaissance flights by night deep into the heart of **Germany**, and in dropping pamphlets as far afield as **Berlin**, **Prague**, **Vienna**, and **Poland**.

Although the pamphlet raids were probably of little value as propaganda, the aircrews so engaged became familiar with the whereabouts of roads, railways, power stations, factories, and airfields in conditions similar to those which would prevail when they were allowed to bomb. The real value of these raids, however, lay in the training they gave.

In peace the aircrews had not had the same opportunity to make long flights by night, certainly not over a totally blacked-out country. Now it was often necessary to change course when attacked by enemy fighters or to avoid sudden bursts of anti-aircraft fire. Each change of direction might be affected by a wind very different from that forecast, for in wartime there was not the same information available about possible changes in the weather. Instead of an expected head wind, there might be a strong wind from an entirely different quarter which would blow the aircraft a hundred miles off course.

At first the Germans offered little opposition to flights over their territory; possibly they preferred not to betray gun and searchlight positions, or perhaps they felt that leaflets could not do any harm. Sometimes the anti-aircraft fire was heavy and an occasional night fighter was seen. But the Germans were working continuously to improve their defences and these became far more formidable as the months passed.

**The worst enemy of the aircrews was the weather. One of the greatest dangers was from the formation of ice on the plane surfaces which could, by altering the shape of the wing, reduce the 'lift' of the aircraft. Ice might also jam the ailerons, elevators, or rudders and cause the pilot temporarily to lose control. In addition, fine powdered snow might seep into the cockpit and gun turrets, freezing on clothes and equipment. All too often the heating system inside the aircraft would fail and crews would have to work in temperatures 20 and 30 degrees below zero. The intense cold was such that on occasions men would beat their heads against the bulkheads—any pain rather than that from the cold. Frostbite was common.**

**An electric storm was a frightening experience and dangerous because of its effect on the compass and other vital instruments. The whole aircraft might be outlined in violet light, sparks might fly from one point to another, and every movement of the crew crackled in the electric air. As the leaflets dropped through the chutes they crackled and gave off sparks; even the knives with which the bundles were cut discharged sparks.**

**Such were some of the conditions that the aircrews had to face night after night. Perhaps the one causing most anxiety was the uncertainty about the weather in England. The most difficult part of the whole flight often came at the end of several hours in the air when crews were almost exhausted, their mental faculties slowed by the cold and strain of the flight. While over **Germany** they had in mind always the prospect of the long return passage across the North Sea, and, if the aircraft was badly damaged, it was during this crossing that difficulties might develop which would lead to a forced landing in the sea. When the English coast was reached, too often the countryside was blanketed in fog.**

**Another task which British bombers were called on to carry out during the early part of the war was to patrol the islands of Sylt, Borkum, and Norderney on the north-west coast of **Germany**. The enemy**

had begun, in October 1939, to use a new weapon against Allied shipping—the magnetic mine—and Bomber Command was ordered to counter this move by patrolling the bases from which many of the minelaying aircraft operated. Aircrews were permitted only to bomb lights placed on the sea to assist seaplanes landing or taking off, but the patrols did achieve a measure of success and the amount of minelaying was reduced.

The ban on the bombing of military objectives on land was temporarily lifted on the night of 19 March 1940 when, as a reprisal for a German attack on Scapa Flow, 30 Whitleys and 20 Hampdens attacked the seaplane base on the island of Sylt. Several hits were reported in the vicinity of the hangars and oil storage tanks but no important damage was done. To those who took part in the attack, Flight Lieutenants W. M. Nixon <sup>6</sup> and P. W. West <sup>7</sup> and Flying Officers K. N. Gray <sup>8</sup> and F. H. Long, <sup>9</sup> and to the public, the raid was a welcome break in the apparent stalemate.

# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## THE FORMATION OF NO. 75 (NZ) SQUADRON

## **THE FORMATION OF No. 75 (NZ) SQUADRON**

**ALTHOUGH DURING THE FIRST few months of the war most of the New Zealand aircrews were scattered among Royal Air Force squadrons, there were a few who formed part of a ‘New Zealand Flight’. The Flight was formed in England on 1 June 1939 to fly out to New Zealand a number of Wellington bombers for the Royal New Zealand Air Force. When war broke out there were eighteen New Zealanders in the Flight—twelve pilots and six ground crew. Their Commanding Officer was Squadron Leader M. W. Buckley.<sup>10</sup>**

**The New Zealand Government immediately placed the six Wellingtons in the flight at the disposal of the British Government. The men themselves were for some weeks uncertain about their future. They wanted to stay and fight but were keen to remain a complete unit. With this desire the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Bomber Command, was in complete agreement.**

**The New Zealand Government approved the formation of a New Zealand Bomber Squadron within the RAF on 1 March 1940. A month later the Air Ministry decided that a squadron to be known as No. 75 (NZ) Squadron should be formed around the existing New Zealand Flight, then stationed at Feltwell in Norfolk, and that a second flight should be formed on 29 May 1940 to complete establishment. In the meantime the Flight continued training and was even able to make a few operational sorties. The first—a reconnaissance and leaflet-dropping operation—took place on 27 March 1940.**

**Three aircraft took off captained by Squadron Leader C. E. Kay,<sup>11</sup> Flying Officer J. N. Collins,<sup>12</sup> and Flying Officer J. Adams;<sup>13</sup> with them were Pilot Officer T. O. Freeman,<sup>14</sup> Pilot Officer D. J. Harkness,<sup>15</sup> and AC1 E. P. Williams.<sup>16</sup> The remainder of the crews were made up from men of the Royal Air Force. The area they covered extended over Brunswick, Ulzen, and Luneberg. The flight was far from comfortable: the cold was intense and the aircraft dropped sickeningly from time to time as they met down-currents of air. All three aircraft returned safely**



**From this time until the invasion of [France](#) and the Low Countries, few operational sorties were carried out by the New Zealand Bomber Squadron, as it was unofficially known. Those made included leaflet-dropping operations, the bombing of Stavanger airfield ( [Norway](#)) and Aalborg airfield ( [Denmark](#)).**

**The most important sortie during this period was made on 12 April by Flight Lieutenant A. A. N. Breckon <sup>17</sup> who, accompanied by Pilot Officer D. J. Harkness, LAC E. P. Williams, three [RAF](#) men and a [Royal Navy](#) observer, flew from Wick to Narvik on reconnaissance. The flight, which lasted 14½ hours, established what was then a record in the [RAF](#) for its length. The following is an abridged version of the captain's report:**

**Landfall was made at the Lofoten Islands at 1305 hours. The visibility on the coast was approximately 2-3 miles, 10/10 cloud at 800 feet, with an extremely strong wind blowing which caused the most unpleasant conditions. Great difficulty was experienced in controlling the aircraft while flying alongside the mountains in the Fiord. A reconnaissance of Vestfjorden was made and photographs were taken between 1330 and 1430 hours. As we proceeded into the Fiord, weather conditions rapidly deteriorated, clouds came down to about 300 feet and to almost sea level in places, causing visibility at times of 500 yards and less. A great effort was made to reach the town of Narvik at the head of the Fiord, but although we were nearly at our objective, we had to turn back for our own safety as we were flying at 200 feet in a heavy snow storm, with the clouds closing in on us, making us wonder if we could make a safe exit. During the entire reconnaissance of the Fiord, we had extremely bad flying conditions and the most terrific bumps the members of the crew had ever experienced. An enemy aircraft, believed to be a Ju88 appeared to be doing a reconnaissance in the Fiord too. It made no effort to attack although we had prepared for action.**

**At this time it was known that the enemy held Narvik in force. The First Battle of Narvik had been fought two days before and the [Royal](#)**

**Navy was to sail up the fifty-mile-long fiord on 13 April to complete the destruction of German naval units in the Narvik area—seven enemy destroyers and one submarine were sunk in the Second Battle of Narvik. Breckon's reconnaissance flight was part of a plan to ensure that no enemy warships or submarines would ambush our forces from the many inlets off the main fiord.**

# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## THE CAMPAIGN IN NORWAY

## **THE CAMPAIGN IN NORWAY**

**DURING THE NORWEGIAN CAMPAIGN Bomber Command was unable to give direct support either to the British or Norwegian armies. There were no bomber bases nearer than in Britain, a distance of some four hundred miles, and it was impossible with the aircraft available to keep up continuous bombing in the battle area. British bombers could only harry the enemy's communications by sea and air, attacking convoys and warships between Germany and Norway and bombing airfields in Denmark and Norway which the Germans were using for their bomber, fighter, and transport aircraft.**

**Crews from the New Zealand Bomber Squadron were among the first to see signs of the impending invasion of Norway. On the night of 6 April they reported seeing numerous motor vehicles, their lights blazing, streaming along the Autobahn from Hamburg to Lubeck.**

**The following day Pilot Officers O. H. Keedwell<sup>18</sup> and J. D. Murphy<sup>19</sup> sighted a strong enemy naval force in the North Sea. They attacked a battleship but scored no hits. Sergeant M. H. S. Innes-Jones in the leading aircraft of one flight saw his bombs overshoot and hit one of the escorting destroyers. Unfortunately the German warships were later lost sight of until they were located and attacked at Bergen two days later.**

**From the time of the German invasion of Norway on 9 April the greater part of the British bombing effort was directed against enemy airfields in Denmark and Norway. The attacks were concentrated especially on Stavanger, the principal air base in Norway from which the Germans attacked Allied shipping. This airfield was first attacked by Bomber Command on 11 April. Preceded by two Blenheim fighters, six Wellingtons made their attack at a very low level in the face of intense anti-aircraft fire. One Wellington was seen to crash in flames and the second pilot, Pilot Officer D. A. Rankin,<sup>20</sup> was lost.**

**During the middle of April British troops landed at Namsos and Aandalsnes, but, in the face of heavy German air attacks, were forced to**

**withdraw a fortnight later. At Narvik, where local air superiority was achieved by British fighters, the town was captured and held until the beginning of June.**

**There is some evidence that the attacks on his airfields did force the enemy to reduce his bombing in the Aandalsnes and Namsos areas, but attacks on shipping and the mining of Kattegat and Skagerrak had no apparent effect upon the flow of German reinforcements into Norway. They could hardly have been expected to do so. It was still winter in Norway, and the weather, the distances from bases, the limited force available, and the lack of fighter protection made it impossible for Bomber Command to intervene effectively in the campaign.**

# EPIISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## THE FALL OF FRANCE

## **THE FALL OF FRANCE**

**THE GERMAN INVASION of France and the Low Countries—and the end of the ‘Phony War’—came with startling suddenness on 10 May 1940. From this time Royal Air Force bombers were required to undertake a new role, one for which they were not designed—the support of the armies in the field.**

**From the moment the attack began, Bomber Command with the Advanced Air Striking Force (AASF)—a force of medium bombers (Battle and Blenheim aircraft) which had been stationed in France since 2 September 1939—endeavoured in every way possible to check or delay the advance of the German armies. The first targets attacked—by Blenheim aircraft—were Dutch airfields known to be in German hands. On the night of 10 May, 36 Wellingtons, three of them from the New Zealand Bomber Squadron, attacked Waalhaven airfield in Holland, and many hits were reported among the buildings and on the runways.**

**By 14 May the situation had become very bad. The Germans broke through at Sedan and, in addition, crossed the Meuse near Dinant. A huge gap was opened, and next day, with virtually nothing to stop them, the Germans poured through towards the Channel. In the north the Belgians were retiring to the Antwerp defences and the resistance of the Dutch was in its final stages.**

**During the period before the break-through the AASF operated by day bombing enemy columns, principally in the Luxembourg area. Most of the aircraft in which they flew were the single-engined Battles, even then regarded as obsolescent. They were slow, unmanoeuvrable, and carried little protection against enemy fighters. At first the aircraft flew at 1000 feet until a target was sighted, when they came down to ground level, lifting to avoid hedges and other obstacles. The attack was made down the length of a column in order to take advantage of the larger target so offered; no bombsight was used. Another method of attack was to bomb whilst diving from 5000 feet to 2000 feet. The AASF suffered heavy losses from the moment it first operated, and in one instance**

**eight Battle aircraft despatched to attack an enemy column inside Germany were never heard of again.**

**Home-based Blenheims, as well as the two AASF [Blenheim](#) squadrons, at this time suffered many losses in attacks on communications targets. On 12 May, for example, ten out of 24 Blenheims which took off from England to bomb bridges and road junctions in the Maastricht area failed to return. Three of those lost were captured by New Zealanders. Nothing is known of the fate of Pilot Officer T. G. Bassett <sup>21</sup> and Pilot Officer C. R. Frankish. <sup>22</sup> Pilot Officer O. H. Keedwell was shot down in flames by fighter aircraft which attacked his formation after it had been broken up by intense anti-aircraft fire.**

**By night during this critical period New Zealanders flying Wellingtons, Whitleys, and Hampdens bombed enemy mechanised columns, bridges, roads, and road junctions many miles behind the battle area. Bombing accuracy was not as high as in daylight but at least losses were light.**

**By attacking bridges and communications the AASF attempted to stop the Germans as they began breaking through at Sedan on 14 May, but, with the force available, could do little. The path of the Battles and Blenheims was bitterly contested and at least 40 of the 71 aircraft which took part in this operation were lost. Pilot Officer V. A. Cunningham <sup>23</sup> lost his life whilst making a brave attempt to machine-gun a pontoon bridge; Pilot Officer T. B. Fitzgerald <sup>24</sup> was**



ACTIVE SERVICE				UNIT		DATE		TIME	
Day	Hour	Lat	Long	Activity	Remarks	Altitude	Direction	Speed	Other
3 <sup>rd</sup>	1800	N 61 40	E 170 14 30	OBSERVATION & NAVIGATION	SEARCH - DENISON			150	
4 <sup>th</sup>	0735	"	"	NAVIGATION	DENISON - DENISON			140	
4 <sup>th</sup>	1600	N 61 15	E 170 15 30	SEARCH & NAVIGATION	SEARCH ON WING (SEARCH DENISON) SEARCH ON WING (SEARCH DENISON) SEARCH ON WING (SEARCH DENISON)			140	140
5 <sup>th</sup>	0835	N 61 45	E 170 15 30	NAVIGATION	DENISON - DENISON			140	
6 <sup>th</sup>	1600	N 61 30	E 170 15 30	"	"			140	
10 <sup>th</sup>	1600	N 61 30	E 170 15 30	"	"			140	
15 <sup>th</sup>	1700	N 61 30	E 170 15 30	"	"			140	
18 <sup>th</sup>	1200	N 61 30	E 170 15 30	"	"			140	
18 <sup>th</sup>	1300	N 61 30	E 170 15 30	"	"			140	
20 <sup>th</sup>	1600	N 61 30	E 170 15 30	"	"			140	
20 <sup>th</sup>	1700	N 61 30	E 170 15 30	"	"			140	
22 <sup>nd</sup>	1100	N 61 30	E 170 15 30	"	"			140	
26 <sup>th</sup>	0735	N 61 30	E 170 15 30	NAVIGATION	SEARCH - DENISON			140	
28 <sup>th</sup>	1655	N 61 30	E 170 15 30	SEARCH & NAVIGATION	SEARCH - DENISON			140	
28 <sup>th</sup>	1745	N 61 30	E 170 15 30	SEARCH & NAVIGATION	SEARCH - DENISON			140	

THE FIRST DAYS OF THE WAR      Reproduction of a page from a navigator's log book

**THE FIRST DAYS OF THE WAR**

Reproduction of a page from a navigator's log book

A BLENHEIM IN FLIGHT



**A BLENHEIM IN FLIGHT**

**No. 75 (NZ) SQUADRON**



AIRCREW OF THE NEW ZEALAND BOMBER SQUADRON

**AIRCREW OF THE NEW ZEALAND BOMBER SQUADRON**

A WELLINGTON OF THE SQUADRON about to take off for Germany



**A WELLINGTON OF THE SQUADRON about to take off for **Germany****

**VERHÄLTNIS DER VERLUSTE**  
(Vergleich der Verluste der deutschen und der britischen Luftwaffe)

	FLUGZEUGE		MANNschaften	
	Deutsch	Britisch	Deutsch	Britisch
16. Juni - 1. Aug.	261	51	5.911	786
8. - 11. Aug.	1879	291	23.111	2238
Zusammen	2140	342	29.022	3024

**UND IN DEUTSCHLAND ...**  
Tag und Nacht bombardieren englische Flieger lebenswichtige Punkte der hitlerschen Kriegsmaschine u. a. in

Augsburg	Baden	Bay (Zürich)	Frankfurt
Bielefeld	Berlin	Bonn	Hannover
Bombay	Breslau	Braunschweig	Kassel
Bombay (Hindus)	Burg	Burg (Köln)	Köln
Bombay (Hindus)	Darmstadt	Darmstadt	Darmstadt
Bombay (Hindus)	Dresden	Dresden	Dresden
Bombay (Hindus)	Düsseldorf	Düsseldorf	Düsseldorf
Bombay (Hindus)	Essen	Essen	Essen
Bombay (Hindus)	Frankfurt	Frankfurt	Frankfurt
Bombay (Hindus)	Hamburg	Hamburg	Hamburg
Bombay (Hindus)	Köln	Köln	Köln
Bombay (Hindus)	Leipzig	Leipzig	Leipzig
Bombay (Hindus)	München	München	München
Bombay (Hindus)	Nürnberg	Nürnberg	Nürnberg
Bombay (Hindus)	Regensburg	Regensburg	Regensburg
Bombay (Hindus)	Siegen	Siegen	Siegen
Bombay (Hindus)	Stuttgart	Stuttgart	Stuttgart
Bombay (Hindus)	Worms	Worms	Worms
Bombay (Hindus)	Zürich	Zürich	Zürich

**Sieht das nach einer deutschen Luftherrschaft aus?!**

PROPAGANDA LEAFLET DROPPED OVER GERMANY

**PROPAGANDA LEAFLET DROPPED OVER GERMANY  
(Translation)**

**PROPORTION OF LOSSES**

**(Only those firmly established as shot down are here taken into consideration.)**

**PLANES**

**CREWS**

**German British Proportion German British Proportion  
Total**

**AND IN GERMANY ...**

**Day and night British flyers bomb vital points of Hitler's war machine  
in, among others:**

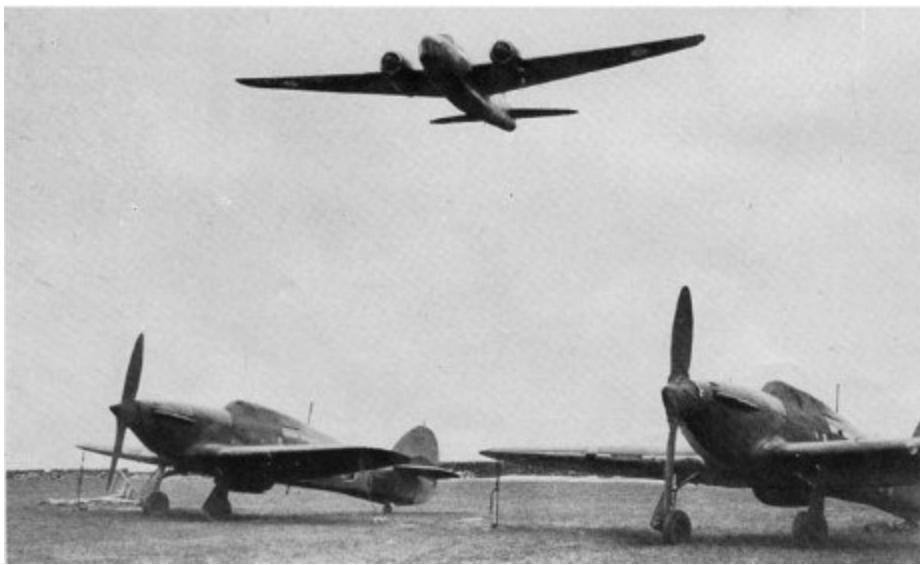
**IS THIS PROOF OF GERMAN AIR SUPERIORITY?**



DISCUSSION BEFORE TAKE-OFF FOR NARVIK  
Flight Lieutenant A. A. N. Breckon (second from left) and crew

**DISCUSSION BEFORE TAKE-OFF FOR NARVIK**

**Flight Lieutenant A. A. N. Breckon (second from left) and crew**



SETTING COURSE  
FOR NORWAY

**SETTING COURSE FOR NORWAY**

## **NARVIK FLIGHT**



ON THE FLIGHT which lasted for  $14\frac{1}{2}$  hours and covered more than 1900 miles. Pilot Officer D. J. Harkness receiving a message from the wireless operator.

**ON THE FLIGHT which lasted for  $14\frac{1}{2}$  hours and covered more than 1900 miles. Pilot Officer D. J. Harkness receiving a message from the wireless operator**

A SQUADRON GROUP  
Squadron Leader C. E. Kay (1), Flying Officer J. Adams (2), Flight Lieutenant N. Williams (3),  
Wing Commander M. W. Buckley (4), Flight Lieutenant A. A. N. Breckon (5) and others



### **A SQUADRON GROUP**

**Squadron Leader C. E. Kay (1), Flying Officer J. Adams (2), Flight Lieutenant N. Williams (3), Wing Commander M. W. Buckley (4), Flight Lieutenant A. A. N. Breckon (5) and others**



### **THE BOMBING OF STAVANGER AIRFIELD, 17 April 1940**

**A series of overlapping photographs from 4000 feet, taken as the aircraft was diving and turning to avoid flak**

### **OPERATIONS OVER NORWAY**

HAMPDENS IN  
FORMATION



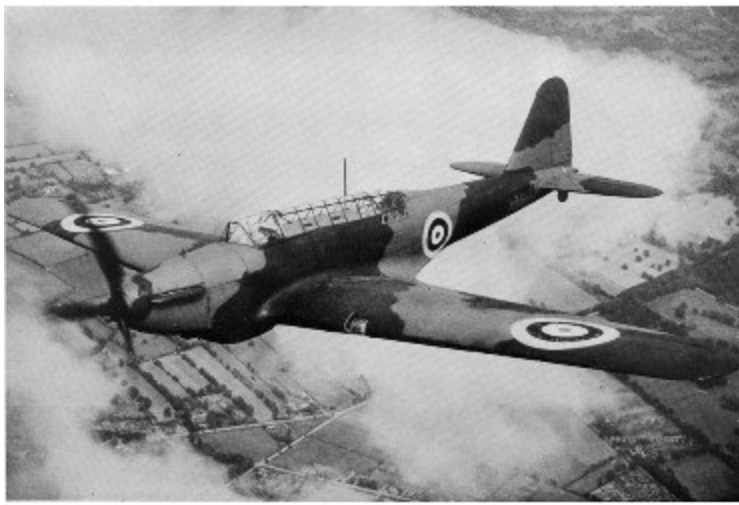
**HAMPDENS IN FORMATION**

A SHIP BURNS IN  
BERGEN HARBOUR



**A SHIP BURNS IN BERGEN HARBOUR**

## *The Fall of France*



A 'FAIREY BATTLE' This type of aircraft became obsolete late in 1940

**A 'FAIREY BATTLE' This type of aircraft became obsolete late in 1940**



A LOW-LEVEL ATTACK on a German road convoy near Luxembourg on 12 May 1940

**A LOW-LEVEL ATTACK on a German road convoy near Luxembourg on 12 May 1940**



BOMBING UP FOR A NIGHT ATTACK

**BOMBING UP FOR A NIGHT ATTACK**





NIGHT ATTACK ON ABBEVILLE

## **NIGHT ATTACK ON ABBEVILLE**

## **A flight to Germany**



CHECKING THE TURRET GUNS

## **CHECKING THE TURRET GUNS**



THE CREWS GO OUT TO THEIR AIRCRAFT



**THE CREWS GO OUT TO THEIR AIRCRAFT**



GOOD LUCK !

**GOOD LUCK!**

INSIDE A BRITISH BOMBER  
The navigators' compartment



**INSIDE A BRITISH BOMBER**  
**The navigators' compartment**

## **TARGET & RETURN FLIGHT**



THE NAVIGATOR PRESSES THE BOMB-  
RELEASE BUTTON

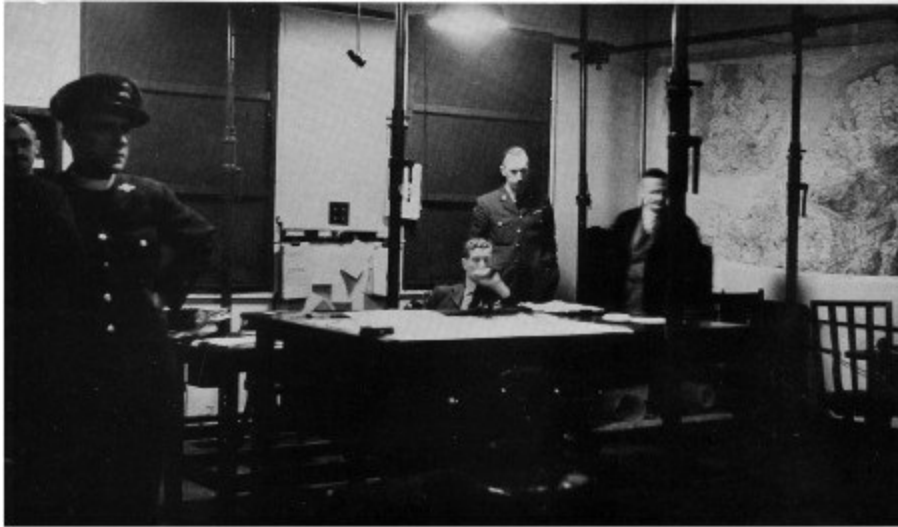
**THE NAVIGATOR PRESSES THE BOMB-RELEASE BUTTON**

A NIGHT ATTACK ON A  
GERMAN CITY  
The figures (1) and (2) show bomb  
bursts, and (3) marks incendiary fires,  
whose apparent curvature is due to the  
weaving of the aircraft while the camera  
shutter is open.



### A NIGHT ATTACK ON A GERMAN CITY

**The figures (1) and (2) show bomb bursts, and (3) marks incendiary fires, whose apparent curvature is due to the weaving of the aircraft while the camera shutter is open.**



WAITING FOR NEWS IN THE OPERATIONS ROOM  
**WAITING FOR NEWS IN THE OPERATIONS ROOM**



SEARCHLIGHTS, FLAK, AND  
FLARES

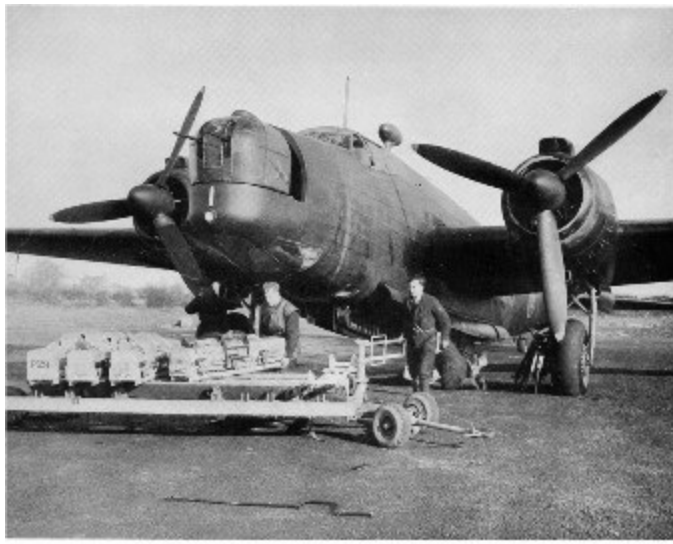
## **SEARCHLIGHTS, FLAK, AND FLARES**

### *Preparations for another flight*



ENGINE INSPECTION AFTER FLIGHT

## **ENGINE INSPECTION AFTER FLIGHT**



LOADING INCENDIARY BOMBS

### LOADING INCENDIARY BOMBS



AWAY AGAIN Aircrew boarding Wellington on night raid

### AWAY AGAIN Aircrew boarding Wellington on night raid

**wounded but crash-landed successfully and was later awarded the DFC for his part in the attack; Pilot Officer H. L. Oakley<sup>25</sup> was also shot down but baled out from his aircraft just in time. The German advance was halted for a few hours but that was all.**

**During the first few days following the break-through, the AASF, now operating only by night because of the earlier heavy losses, and hampered both by continual moves from one base to another and the resulting breakdown in supply and communications, made few attacks on the enemy. Bomber Command flew mainly by night, directing as many sorties as possible against enemy troop movements and**

communications in the fighting area, but could do no more than harass the enemy's advance.

On 20 May the approach of German columns towards Arras threatened the rear of the British



**FRANCE RAF OPERATIONS, MAY-JUNE 1940**

Expeditionary Force in **France** and caused the cancellation of a decision made the day before that medium bombers were not again to be operated in daylight. Twenty-four Blenheims attacked enemy columns in the Arras area, and on the night of 20 May Bomber Command directed a maximum effort against communications as near as possible to the front line. Ninety-one aircraft were sent out, the majority of the New Zealanders in the Command flying in Wellington aircraft and attacking enemy concentrations in the Cambrai-Le Cateau-St. Quentin area; those who flew **Blenheim** aircraft attacked enemy columns near Audenarde and Grammont, and those flying Whitleys and Hampdens bombed bridges over the river Oise. New Zealanders attached to the AASF were also in action on the night of 20 May attacking German lines of communication across the Meuse.

On 21 May the Germans reached the Channel Coast, severing the Allied armies in the north from those south of the **Somme** and Aisne Rivers. The British Expeditionary Force and units of the French Army

retired towards the sea and, hemmed in from every side, formed a defensive perimeter at **Dunkirk**. In spite of all the enemy could do by land, sea, and air, more than 330,000 troops were evacuated to England.

The evacuation began on the night of 26 May. In the days and nights immediately before this date the AASF, having neither the range nor the detailed information necessary, was unable to take any part in supporting the Northern Armies. The only direct part that Bomber Command could play in influencing the course of the land battle was to detail such Blenheims as were available to attack enemy columns near the battle zone and to bomb pontoon bridges over rivers and canals.

Home-based bombers and AASF aircraft continued to operate by night, directing their attacks partly against the Upper Meuse crossings and partly against the great railway network in **Germany** west of the Rhine. As usual, men from New Zealand serving in **RAF** squadrons took part in these flights. The New Zealand Bomber Squadron, too, was in action on several occasions and on the night of 21 May suffered its first loss when Flight Lieutenant J. N. Collins failed to return. On this night several claims were made for hits on permanent and temporary bridges over the Meuse near Dinant and Namur.

During the period of the evacuation from **Dunkirk**—26 May to 4 June—Blenheims made daylight attacks on roads and communications near the evacuation area; by night, other home-based bombers carried on the offensive. The majority of the New Zealanders in Bomber Command, operating in Wellington aircraft, flew over Nieuport, St. Omer, Aire, Courtrai, and other towns occupied by the Germans, bombing as many road and rail junctions as they had bombs. Unfortunately the results of these attacks were often not seen because of the prevailing low cloud.

After Dunkirk the Germans turned their attention to the Allied armies in the South then disposed along the **Somme** and Aisne. Within less than two weeks the French forces were overrun and on 17 June Pétain asked for an armistice.

**During this period the men of Bomber Command and the AASF continued to harass the enemy by attacking troop movements near the battle area, usually where the pressure was heaviest on the French. As the German forces crossed the Somme, and later the Seine, the strongest possible effort was made to hinder their progress. Bridges over the Somme, the Seine, and over other natural barriers were bombed and attacks made on the enemy's communications system as far behind the lines as the Ardennes.**



# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## EARLY STRATEGIC BOMBING

## **EARLY STRATEGIC BOMBING**

**IMMEDIATELY THE GERMANS** invaded **France** and the Low Countries the Air Staff was authorised to bomb military objectives in **Germany** west of the Rhine, but as it was still to **Britain's** advantage not to extend the bombing war, projected air assaults on the Ruhr were postponed. At first there was no evidence that the Germans were aiming at other than purely military objectives, but when on 14 May the bombing of **Rotterdam** made plain the enemy's disregard for civilians, Bomber Command was authorised to begin its programme for the strategic bombing of **Germany**. The most suitable targets were thought to be railway marshalling yards and oil plants. The bombing of oil plants could obviously not have had any immediate effect on the course of the land battle, but it could hardly have been foreseen that the battle would end as soon as it did. Nor was the difficulty of making an accurate attack on such a target fully realised.

The first bombs of the strategic bombing plan were dropped on the night of 15 May 1940. Ninety aircraft were detailed and though No. 75 (NZ) Squadron contributed only three, many other New Zealanders flew in Wellingtons, Whitleys, and Hampdens belonging to **RAF** squadrons. The objectives attacked were railway junctions, marshalling yards, and oil plants, including those at **Duisburg** and **Dortmund**.

From this night onwards **RAF** bombers not required either to give close support to the British and French armies or to attack the enemy's communications west of the Rhine, continued the strategic bombing of **Germany**. The enemy's complex railway system in the Ruhr was attacked night after night, as were oil plants in the Ruhr and as far afield as **Hamburg**, **Hanover**, and **Mannheim**.

On 10 June **Italy** declared war on **Britain** and **France**, and from this time Bomber Command made occasional deviations from the strategic bombing of **Germany** to attack industrial objectives in **Italy**. The first target was the Fiat works at Turin, but of 36 Whitley aircraft which took off from the **Channel Islands** on the night of 11 June to make the 1300-

mile journey only eleven reached **Italy**; heavy storms were encountered over the Alps, icing conditions were severe, and many engines failed. According to the records available only one New Zealander, Pilot Officer P. G. Brodie, <sup>26</sup> took part in this first war flight over Italian soil.

Twelve Wellingtons, six of them from No. 75 (NZ) Squadron, were to have accompanied the Whitleys to **Italy**, but as they were preparing to leave from a French aerodrome the local military authorities drove all kinds of country carts and lorries onto the airfield and prevented the aircraft taking-off. The French were apprehensive that an attack on **Italy** would only bring reprisals which the British would be unable to resist or prevent.

With the capitulation of **France** on 25 June 1940 strategic bombing became the chief means by which the offensive could be carried to the enemy. The targets chosen were aircraft depots, airframe factories, and aluminium factories, attacks on which it was hoped would reduce the strength of the **German Air Force**. The Command was also to continue with the bombing of oil and communications targets.

The immediate task was to take steps to reduce the scale of attack on England. Aircraft works and airfields were bombed and many attacks made on ports and shipping concentrations. On 22 July, however, it was decided that attacks on barges and shipping in canals and ports were only to be carried out if the craft appeared to be concentrated for invasion.

In the weeks following the fall of France British bombers, usually numbering up to one hundred, would go out night after night to bomb targets in **Germany**. Their course would take them over separate areas far and wide, from **Denmark** to Southern France. Though it was hoped to cause damage to all objectives attacked—shipbuilding yards, naval establishments, oil plants, railways and canals, besides airframe and aluminium factories—it was also intended that the sirens should be kept wailing all over **Germany** during the hours of darkness. This was done by attacking several objectives in one night and by spreading the raids over

several hours.

Most targets were bombed from several thousand feet, but some crews descended to a very low height to make sure of identifying and hitting their target. If there was dense cloud this could be extremely dangerous, especially in hilly or mountainous country; cloud can play strange tricks on the senses so that a pilot can imagine that the aircraft is being flown upside down or in any but the right position. If he succumbs to the temptation to disbelieve his instruments, he may easily lose control and crash in attempting to right his aircraft.

Pilot Officer J. F. Swift <sup>27</sup> made a successful attack on the railway marshalling yard at Osnabruck during July 1940, from a height of only 700 feet. A few nights later he was detailed to attack an airfield at Rotenburg; after waiting for 45 minutes over the target, he attacked from a similar height and scored several hits with his bombs on a hangar. He then machine-gunned the airfield and two nearby trains from 300 feet.

A particularly hazardous low-level raid at this time was that made on the *Tirpitz*, then berthed at [Wilhelmshaven](#). A terrific barrage of anti-aircraft fire was encountered, and, although four aircraft attacked, only one escaped destruction—it was unable to get near the target and dropped its bombs on a convoy of ships nearby. Pilot Officer A. H. Gould, <sup>28</sup> who captained one of the aircraft shot down, was taken prisoner.

The damage caused by the bombing of German industry and communications at this time was not very serious. On occasions, when conditions were favourable, severe damage was done, but it is now known that many of the bombs dropped were miles off their targets.

This lack of accuracy was caused by the difficulty of navigating an aircraft several hundred miles over a totally blacked-out country, of finding the target upon arrival in the area, and of hitting that target whilst trying to evade innumerable bursts of anti-aircraft fire and the probing fingers of searchlights. An aircraft rarely flies in a straight line

but, affected by continually changing winds, almost always moves crabwise in much the same manner as a boat crossing a swift stream. It was, of course, extremely difficult for the meteorologist to predict accurately the speed and direction of the wind for several hours ahead, and it was necessary for the navigator to check continually any change in the wind by measuring with a special instrument the drift of the aircraft relative to objects on the ground. When the aircraft flew over heavy cloud for hundreds of miles the navigator could only work out, with the aid of his sextant, an approximate position (usually to within five or ten miles) by observation of the stars.

With every change in direction, speed, and height of the aircraft—and sudden bursts of ‘flak’ made them frequent—the navigator had to make new calculations. It is obvious that the task of guiding an aircraft flying at a speed of nearly three miles a minute to within even a few miles of the target was not easy. Upon arrival at the estimated position of their objective the bomber crews would have to search systematically for the target, often for as long as an hour, a task which was made more difficult by the dummy cities which the Germans were beginning to build. Very often the bombers arrived to find the area covered in cloud, and the pilots could only return to base with their bomb-loads, with the faint hope that on the way back some suitable last-resort target might be seen through a gap in the cloud.

Though the German defences were to become much stronger, they were by no means negligible during the summer of 1940. Anti-aircraft fire was concentrated and accurate over some targets; the number of guns defending the more important German towns was steadily increasing. At first, enemy night fighters were rarely seen but towards the end of July they became more numerous.

One of the first aircraft from No. 75 (NZ) Squadron to be engaged by enemy night fighters was captained by Flying Officer N. Williams.<sup>29</sup> The attack was made by three He113s over Wesel; one fighter (and possibly a second) was shot down by the gunners in the Wellington and the third was driven off. The Wellington, though riddled with bullets, was then

**flown back to its base.**

**Perhaps the crew of another aircraft from No. 75 Squadron also met German night fighters on this night, for they did not return. Two of the crew, Flight Sergeant R. A. J. Anderson,<sup>30</sup> the wireless operator, and Sergeant J. L. Owen,<sup>31</sup> a gunner, were New Zealanders.**

**It might justifiably be asked what was the point in our aircrews risking their lives at all in 1940 since it must have been evident, even then, that such little accurate bombing as was possible could hardly have any real effect on **Germany's** war economy. Would it not have been preferable for Bomber Command to have conserved its strength for use in a possible invasion of England and for offensive action in the future?**

**The answer is that after the Battle of **France** strategic bombing at once became the central point in Allied strategy. **Germany's** defences were tested and probed as they grew and methods were gradually evolved of identifying a target even from the great heights at which it became necessary to fly. Had the bomber force been conserved until it could be used really effectively it would not have been able to keep ahead of the enemy's counter-measures.**

# **EPIISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2**

## **THE BATTLE OF BRITAIN**

## **THE BATTLE OF BRITAIN**

**IN WESTMINSTER ABBEY** there is a chapel dedicated to the memory of the men of the **Royal Air Force** killed in the Battle of **Britain**. The principal part of this memorial—the stained-glass window—specially commemorates the men who flew with **Fighter Command**. North of the chapel, a **Roll of Honour** containing the names of 1495 pilots and aircrew killed during the battle rests on a wrought-iron lectern. On the Roll are the names of 47 **New Zealanders**, 25 of whom were serving with **Bomber Command** at the time of their deaths. The **Roll of Honour** was placed in **Westminster Abbey** in recognition of the part played by the men of all commands in the **RAF** in preventing an invasion of England.

After the fall of **France** the Germans recognised that before any invasion of England could be attempted they must attain supremacy in the air. Without it they would be unable to escort an invasion fleet across the Channel. They knew, too, that the **RAF** could play a vital part both in repelling a landing and in any land battles fought.

To the men of **Fighter Command** must go the credit for preventing the **Luftwaffe** from achieving air supremacy over the Channel and the **British Isles**. It was they, in the great air battles fought during the summer of 1940, who convinced **Hitler** that the invasion of England should be postponed indefinitely.

But **Bomber Command** also played some part in forcing **Hitler** to that decision. From the time the battle was first joined, British bombers helped to reduce the weight of the air attack on England, both by raids on enemy airfields in occupied territories and by attacking the German aircraft industry. When **RAF** bombers visited **Germany** they often dropped their bombs on airfields if they could not find their targets; even if they had already dropped their bombs, they were sometimes able to destroy enemy aircraft. One night towards the end of August, **Flight Lieutenant J. Adams** was returning from the Ruhr when he noticed aircraft activity at the **Nivelles** airfield. He watched two aircraft land on the flare path and then, descending to 1300 feet, manoeuvred into



position for his front gunner to fire at a third. After a few bursts from the twin Brownings in the nose of the Wellington, the enemy dived straight into the ground and burst into flames.

Early in September the movement of large numbers of self-propelled barges and small ships into Ostend, **Dunkirk**, Calais, Boulogne, and Le Havre suggested that invasion was imminent. Practically the whole of the bomber force was diverted during September to attack these invasion ports. That much damage was caused to **Hitler's** invasion fleet there can be no doubt. Coastal targets are not difficult to find except when the weather is very unfavourable.

On 17 September **Hitler** decided to postpone the invasion of England indefinitely. There were many factors that influenced his decision. The principal one was undoubtedly the failure of the **Luftwaffe** to attain air supremacy: the great air battles of 15 September in which 56 enemy aircraft were shot down proved that Fighter Command was still far from impotent. Bomber Command had caused extensive damage to the invasion fleet and on the night of 15 September—which date now seems in retrospect to have been the turning point of the Battle of **Britain**—had attacked in strength shipping in ports from Boulogne to Antwerp.

Most New Zealanders operating over the invasion ports at this time flew **RAF** Wellington bombers, some of them from No. 75 (NZ) Squadron. On one occasion two aircraft from the New Zealand Bomber Squadron were required to drop flares on Ostend to assist naval vessels begin a half-hour bombardment of that port. The flares were dropped exactly on time and gave the **Navy** an accurate point at which to aim. Congratulations and thanks for the useful co-operation were received from the Admiralty the next day, and Flying Officer D. J. Harkness was later awarded the DFC for his part in this operation.

One of the most determined attacks made on an invasion port was carried out by Pilot Officer F. H. Denton, <sup>32</sup> of **Greymouth**. The following is an abridged version of the citation accompanying the award of the Distinguished Flying Cross to this officer:

**He broke cloud at 1000 feet and manoeuvred until he was in a position to attack this target (the docks and shipping at Flushing) which he knew was heavily defended. Pilot Officer Denton dived through a devastating curtain of light flak and machine-gun fire in a most determined and courageous manner, releasing his bombs at an altitude so low that the force of the explosions rocketed his aircraft several hundred feet in the air. Nevertheless, he was able to see large fires and explosions amongst the shipping and docks. He eventually, with great difficulty, brought his aircraft, with gaping holes through each wing, safely back to its base....**

# EPIISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## THE CONTRIBUTION

## **THE CONTRIBUTION**

**THE PART THAT NEW ZEALANDERS played in the work of Bomber Command during the first year of the war is difficult to assess. They were scattered among every squadron in the Command and took part in almost every operation.**

**During the period from the beginning of the war to the end of 1940, about 150 New Zealanders with short-service commissions in the **RAF** flew for varying periods with Bomber Command operational squadrons. Nearly half of them were reported missing, of whom a few were subsequently found to have been taken prisoner of war.**

**In addition, members of the **RNZAF** trained in New Zealand began to arrive in increasing numbers during the latter half of 1940. By November there were more than a hundred **RNZAF** officers and men, additional to those with short-service commissions, serving in Bomber Command. By the end of the war nearly 5000 New Zealanders had flown **RAF** bombers in action; of these, over 1800 were killed and a further 330 taken prisoner.**

**Many New Zealanders who were serving in the **Royal Air Force** during the early part of the war later reached high rank. Both Squadron Leader A. McKee and Squadron Leader M. W. Buckley were to become Air Commodores, McKee to command a Base of four airfields housing operational units and Buckley to be Air Officer Commanding No. 1 (Islands) Group in the South **Pacific**. Others became Group Captains commanding stations housing sometimes two operational squadrons, sometimes training units. New Zealand Wing Commanders, responsible for the operational efficiency of the **RAF** squadrons they commanded, were numerous.**

**Although few in number, New Zealanders formed a greater proportion of Bomber Command in the first year of the war than at any later period. At a time when the shortage of trained aircrews was acute they made an important contribution to the British bombing effort, and with their**

**fellows in the RAF they laid the foundations of a force which was later to become a potent factor in Allied strategy.**

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## [BACKMATTER]

**THE AUTHOR, B. G. Clare, served with the RNZAF from 1942 to 1948. He flew with Bomber Command and was taken prisoner of war in October 1944. As a member of the staff of the RNZAF Historical Section, London, he wrote the official narrative on the work of New Zealanders in Bomber Command. At present he is on the staff of War History Branch.**

# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

### *BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES*

<sup>1</sup>Squadron Leader L. S. LAMB; clerk; born Wellington, 5 Aug 1910; killed in aircraft accident, 30 Oct 1939.

<sup>2</sup>Squadron Leader M. H. S. INNES-JONES; RNZAF; Air Department, Wellington; born Wellington, 5 May 1917; Director of Manning, Air Department, 1948-49; wounded May 1940.

<sup>3</sup>Flight Lieutenant E. J. HETHERINGTON; RAF; born Timaru, 16 Oct 1914; killed on air operations, 14 Dec 1939.

<sup>4</sup>Air Commodore A. MCKEE, CBE, DSO, DFC, AFC, m.i.d.; RAF; England; farmer; born Oxford, Canterbury, 10 Jan 1902; commanded 9 Sqn, 1940; RAF Station, Marham, 1941-43; Base Commander, Mildenhall, 1943-45; AOC No. 205 Group, Italy, 1945.

<sup>5</sup>Flight Lieutenant C. B. G. KNIGHT, DFM; RNZAF; RNZAF Station, Lauthala Bay, Fiji; born Tolaga Bay, 7 Jun 1912. Flight Lieutenant (then Corporal) Knight was the first member of the RNZAF to be decorated in the Second World War.

<sup>6</sup>Squadron Leader W. M. NIXON, DFC; RAF; born Auckland, 6 May 1913; p.w. 17 Aug 1940.

<sup>7</sup>Squadron Leader P. W. WEST, DFC; clerk; born Palmerston North, 15 Apr 1917; killed on air operations, 4 Jul 1942.

<sup>8</sup>Flying Officer K. N. GRAY, DFC, Czechoslovakian War Cross; schoolteacher; born Christchurch, 9 Nov 1914; killed in aircraft accident, 1 May 1940.

<sup>9</sup>Flight Lieutenant F. H. LONG, DFC; woolbuyer; born Masterton, 16 Jul 1916; killed on air operations, 13 Mar 1941.



<sup>10</sup>**Air Commodore M. W. B UCKLEY, CBE, US Legion of Merit, m.i.d.; RNZAF; born Seacliff, 3 Aug 1895; commanded NZ Flight 1939-40; 75 (NZ) Sqn, 1940-41; RAF Station, Feltwell, 1941; AOC Northern Group, Auckland, 1942-43; AOC No. 1 (Islands) Group, Guadalcanal, 1943-44; Deputy Chief of Air Staff, RNZAF, 1944-45; AOC RNZAF Headquarters, London, 1946-50.**

<sup>11</sup>**Air Commodore C. E. K AY, CBE, DFC; RNZAF; Air Department, Wellington; born Auckland, 25 Jun 1902; commanded 75 (NZ) Sqn, 1940-41; Air 1, No. 8 (Bomber) Group Headquarters, 1942; commanded RNZAF Station, Ohakea, 1944; Wigram, 1945; Air Member for Supply, Air Department.**

<sup>12</sup>**Flight Lieutenant J. N. C OLLINS; clerk; born Wellington, 31 Mar 1917; killed on air operations, 21 May 1940.**

<sup>13</sup>**Wing Commander J. A DAMS, DFC, AFC; London; auctioneer; born Christchurch, 31 Aug 1911.**

<sup>14</sup>**Wing Commander T. O. F REEMAN, DSO, DFC and bar; RAF; born Lawrence, 1916; killed on air operations, 17 Dec 1943.**

<sup>15</sup>**Squadron Leader D. J. H ARKNESS, DFC; clerk; born Midhurst, Taranaki, 16 Sep 1916; killed on air operations, 31 May 1942.**

<sup>16</sup>**Flight Lieutenant E. P. W ILLIAMS, DFM; RNZAF; Air Department, Wellington; born Rotorua, 22 Sep 1916.**

<sup>17</sup>**Wing Commander A. A. N. B RECKON, DFC; RNZAF; RNZAF Station, Ohakea; born Auckland, 28 Nov 1913; commanded Navigation Training Squadron, Bassingbourn, 1940-41; held various commands and staff appointments in New Zealand and the Pacific, 1941-47; Senior Air Staff Officer, RNZAF Headquarters, London, 1947-49; commanded Flying Wing, Ohakea, Mar 1950—.**

<sup>18</sup>**Flying Officer O. H. K EEDWELL; stock agent; born Levin, 10 Jun 1913;**

killed on air operations, 12 May 1940.

<sup>19</sup>Pilot Officer J. D. MURPHY; farmer; born Hawera, 2 Apr 1919; killed on air operations, 24 Apr 1940.

<sup>20</sup>Pilot Officer D. A. RANKIN; clerk; born Wellington, 23 Nov 1914; killed on air operations, 11 Apr 1940.

<sup>21</sup>Flying Officer T. G. BASSETT; bank clerk; born Te Kopuru, 12 Oct 1917; killed on air operations, 12 May 1940.

<sup>22</sup>Pilot Officer C. R. FRANKISH; farmer; born Wanganui, 17 Dec 1914; killed on air operations, 12 May 1940.

<sup>23</sup>Pilot Officer V. A. CUNNINGHAM; shipping clerk; born Wellington, 24 Apr 1916; killed on air operations, 14 May 1940.

<sup>24</sup>Wing Commander T. B. FITZGERALD, DFC; farmer; born Timaru, 11 Jul 1919; wounded 14 May 1940.

<sup>25</sup>Flight Lieutenant H. L. OKLEY; Birmingham, England; farmer; born Ashburton, 6 May 1917.

<sup>26</sup>Pilot Officer P. G. BRODIE; RAF; clerk; born Wanganui, 28 Dec 1916; p.w. 20 Aug 1940.

<sup>27</sup>Flying Officer J. F. SWIFT, DFC; motor mechanic; born Invercargill, 19 Jun 1917; killed on air operations, 30 Sep 1941.

<sup>28</sup>Pilot Officer A. H. GOULD, DFC; New South Wales, Australia; clerk; born Wanganui, 26 Sep 1918; p.w. 20 Jul 1940.

<sup>29</sup>Flight Lieutenant N. WILLIAMS, DFC; RAF; born Frankton Junction, 4 Oct 1915; killed on air operations, 11 May 1941.

<sup>30</sup>Flight Sergeant R. A. J. ANDERSON; gardener; born United Kingdom, 13 Dec 1913; killed on air operations, 21 Jul 1940.

<sup>31</sup>Sergeant J. L. OWEN; clerk; born Wanganui, 14 Dec 1915; killed on air

operations, 21 Jul 1940.

<sup>32</sup>Wing Commander F. H. D<sub>ENTON</sub>, DFC and bar; **London**; surveyor; born **Greymouth**, 23 Apr 1917.

**The occupations given in each case are those on enlistment.**

# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

**THE NARRATIVE** *is based on official records and reports made available by the **Air Ministry** and supplemented by personal interviews.* The photographs were supplied by the Air Ministry Information Section and the Royal New Zealand **Air Force** official collection, with the exception of those on **pages 9 and 15 ( bottom)** which were lent by M. H. S. Innes-Jones, on **page 16 ( top)** lent by M. A. Poulton, and on **pages 17 ( top)** and **23** from *The Times, London*. The maps are by L. D. McCormick. The navigator's log book, illustrated on **page 9**, was lent by M. H. S. Innes-Jones.

# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## [BACKMATTER]

THE TYPE USED THROUGHOUT THE SERIES IS *Aldine Bembo* WHICH WAS REVIVED FOR MONOTYPE FROM A RARE BOOK PRINTED BY ALDUS IN 1495 \* THE TEXT IS SET IN 12 POINT ON A BODY OF 14 POINT

# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## NEW ZEALANDERS IN THE BATTLE OF BRITAIN

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## [COVERS]

NEW ZEALAND IN THE SECOND WORLD WAR  
*1939-1945*



NEW ZEALANDERS IN THE  
BATTLE OF BRITAIN

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NEW ZEALANDERS IN THE  
BATTLE OF BRITAIN

by

A. F. FAIRLIE

WAR HISTORY BRANCH  
DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMS  
WELLINGTON, NEW ZEALAND  
1945



# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

[FRONTISPIECE]



Fighter Pilot

***Fighter Pilot***

COVER PHOTOGRAPH

**Vapour Trails over Westminster**

**EPIISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2**

**[TITLE PAGE]**

**NEW ZEALANDERS IN THE BATTLE OF BRITAIN**

**N. W. FAIRCLOTH**

**WAR HISTORY BRANCH**

**DEPARTMENT OF INTERNAL AFFAIRS WELLINGTON, NEW ZEALAND**

**1950**

# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

[EDITORPAGE]

**IT IS THE INTENTION** *of this series to present aspects of New Zealand's part in the Second World War which will not receive detailed treatment in the campaign volumes and which are considered either worthy of special notice or typical of many phases of our war experience. The series is illustrated with material which would otherwise seldom see publication.*

**H. K. KIPPENBERGER**

,  
**Major-General**  
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

NEW ZEALAND WAR HISTORIES

# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## [ACKNOWLEDGMENT]

**‘The gratitude of every home in our Island, in our Empire, and indeed throughout the World, except in the abodes of the guilty, goes out to the British airmen who, undaunted by odds, unwearied in their constant challenge and mortal danger, are turning the tide of world war by their prowess and by their devotion. Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few.’**

**Rt. Hon. Winston Churchill**

**in the House of Commons, 20 August 1940**

# EPIISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

# PROLOGUE

## **PROLOGUE**

**THIS** account of the great days of 1940 which have become known as the Battle of **Britain** is limited to the story of the part played by New Zealanders who served with Fighter Command squadrons during the period 10 July to 31 October 1940. Much of the individual achievement of these men—nearly 100 served with Fighter Command at some time during the period—can be referred to in only general terms in a narrative of this length; it follows that those whose names appear are selected in the main because their actions serve best to illustrate the general account and not for any reasons connected with later achievement of high rank or position.

This narrative is confined to the deeds of fighter pilots, but although their gallantry has by now become a household word, the work of **Coastal Command** in the protection of sea-going convoys, and of Bomber Command in the destruction of the enemy's embarkation ports, barges, and other craft needed to transport an invading army to **Britain**, played no small part in frustrating the enemy's invasion plan.

Nor was the battle fought exclusively in the air, a point which was made by the Secretary of State for Air on 18 September 1940 in these words:

.... The battle is being fought not only in the air. It is being fought in the Maintenance Command, in the workshops, and at the dispersal points of the squadrons of the Royal Air Force. It is being fought in the Flying Training and Technical Training Commands of the **Royal Air Force**, whose hard work and devotion to duty, often under the enemy's fire, is greatly increasing the flow of aircrews to our fighting squadrons. It is being fought, too, in the aircraft and aero-engine factories and in our other munition factories.

The staunch resistance to the blitz of the citizens of **London** and the great provincial towns should also be remembered.

# EPIISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## THE STAGE IS SET



## THE STAGE IS SET

**WHEN FRANCE**, overrun in some six weeks by the full weight of the German forces, finally capitulated on 25 June 1940, Winston Churchill had already foreseen the next stage in world events. On 18 June, in an address to the House of Commons, he said, 'What General Weygand called the Battle of **France** is over. I expect that the Battle of **Britain** is about to begin.'

Although an invasion of Great Britain had been considered by the German Naval Staff as early as the late autumn of 1939, **Hitler** had not been approached with the idea until the last day of May 1940, when the collapse of **France** and the subsequent occupation of the Franco-Belgian coastline appeared imminent. Nor did **Hitler** become patently interested in the idea until 2 July, when he first gave orders for the three Services to initiate preparations for such an undertaking, and further stipulated the achievement of air superiority as an indispensable condition. A fortnight later **Hitler** had decided that preparations for a landing between Ramsgate and the Isle of Wight were to be completed by the middle of August. On 31 July he approved 15 September as the earliest D-day but reserved his final decision pending the results of the projected intensified air operations.



*Briefing pilots and gunners of a Defiant Squadron*

***Briefing pilots and gunners of a Defiant Squadron***

Had the Germans followed **Dunkirk** with a speedy invasion of **Britain**, there was little organised ground defence to stop them, for the British troops evacuated from the French beaches had been forced to abandon all but their rifles. But an immediate invasion was not possible, for the German **Navy**, faced with the problem of transporting some forty divisions, the number **Hitler** considered necessary for the assault, had first to assemble all the array of small ships, barges, tugs, and steamers necessary to transport an invading army across the Channel, equip them for their task, and then move them to the assembly ports. The ports themselves nearly all needed repair; in addition, sea routes had to be swept clear of mines and German mines laid as a precaution against interception by units of the Home Fleet. Finally the entire force had to be trained and co-ordinated for the task. But, equally important, the prerequisite for invasion was command of the air, for even if a bridgehead could be taken by weight of numbers, the problem of supplying an army ashore in a foreign land had to be solved. Thus the aim of the German strategy was so to weaken the British fighter defences that the **Luftwaffe** would be able to give adequate support to an invasion of the **British Isles**.

\* \* \* \* \*

The strength of Fighter Command when the issue was joined on 10 July was fifty-two operational squadrons, all but three of which had already been heavily engaged in the Continental fighting. This force was composed of twenty-two squadrons of Hurricanes, twenty of Spitfires, eight of Blenheims, and two of Defiants. It had always been assumed that any attack on Great **Britain** would be heaviest in the South-east, i.e., the area directly opposite Northern France, and accordingly the majority of the fighter squadrons were disposed there under the control of No. II Group, commanded by the New Zealand airman, Air Vice-Marshal K. R. Park. <sup>1</sup>

Throughout the battle Air Vice-Marshal Park had some twenty-two squadrons under his control, though his effective fighting force was

restricted to about twelve Hurricane and six Spitfire squadrons. The balance was made up of **Blenheim** squadrons not suitable for daylight interception. This meant that, assuming every squadron could put its full complement of aircraft into the air, the fighting strength available to him at any time was limited to about eighteen squadrons, or less than 220 aircraft—the normal squadron formation being twelve aircraft. The situation, then, was extremely grave, for against this small force the Germans had available in the West on 10 August a total strength of 1808 bombers and dive-bombers and 1223 single-engined and twin-engined fighter aircraft. It was true that unless the other three Groups composing Fighter Command were heavily engaged they could be called upon to replace tired and depleted squadrons in No. II Group—as indeed they were—but here the Germans had one outstanding advantage. They could mass a heavy attack in one sector, where only a proportion of the British fighter strength was available, and at the same time by threats to other parts effectively compel Fighter Command to keep considerable forces away from the main zone of attack. Thus it was vital that the defenders should have sufficient warning of an attack so that the fighter squadrons could be airborne on their patrol lines in time to make an interception. This warning was achieved by means of a series of coastal radar stations sited at intervals around much of England, **Scotland**, and Wales.

Herein lay the essence of Fighter Command's defensive strategy, for had the Group Commanders been compelled by the absence of early warning to man their patrol lines constantly, they would have found themselves as often as not at the disadvantage of having to make interceptions with fighters low in fuel. In addition pilots, engines, and maintenance crews would have been subjected to severe strain by the long hours of wasteful flying. Over land the early type of radar was not effective and raid intelligence was supplied by a chain of **Observer Corps** posts whose members tracked enemy formations by sight or sound and reported the information to Fighter Command Headquarters.

This system, working progressively downwards from Fighter

**Command through the Groups to the Sectors, enabled the Command to identify approaching formations and allot the interception of raids to particular Groups, also to reinforce one Group by another if necessary. The Group Commander decided which Sector would meet each specific raid and detailed the strength in squadrons to be used. The Sector Commander decided which fighter units were to be employed and operated the machinery of interception by using the position, course, height, and speed of the enemy aircraft and of his own fighters, which were concurrently displayed on his plotting table in the operations room. He controlled his fighters by a series of courses broadcast over the radio telephone until, on making interception, tactical control passed to the fighter leader in the air who then directed his pilots into battle.**

**This was the system under which the battle was fought. Dependent on painstaking attention to detail by hundreds of men and women, it had been organised by Air Chief Marshal Sir Hugh Dowding in the pre-war years, and because of its inherent quality and flexibility it enabled the German mass attacks to be beaten.**

# **EPIISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2**

## **THE PHASES OF THE BATTLE**

## ***THE PHASES OF THE BATTLE***

**THE BATTLE** fell into four main phases. During the first phase from 10 July to 18 August a series of raids was directed against Channel shipping and ports on the South coast. Between 10 July and 7 August the **Luftwaffe** was engaged in testing the fighter defences to ascertain their strength, dispositions, and capabilities. In the meantime, the German units in **France** were being brought up to strength in readiness for the main assault. From 8 to 18 August the **Luftwaffe** sought to eliminate Fighter Command by sheer weight of numbers. A lull of five days followed. The second phase opened on 24 August when the attacks began again; although Fighter Command had not been eliminated, these attacks were directed on the airfields covering the approach to **London**. In the third phase, the full day and night offensive against **London** opened on 7 September and lasted roughly until the 27th. From that date until 31 October the Germans were forced by heavy casualties to abandon mass daylight raids by long-range bombers. In their place, as the fourth phase of the battle, were substituted high-level fighter-bomber attacks with the sprawling mass of **London** still the primary target. In effect, the attempt to gain the air superiority necessary before an invasion could be launched had been abandoned.

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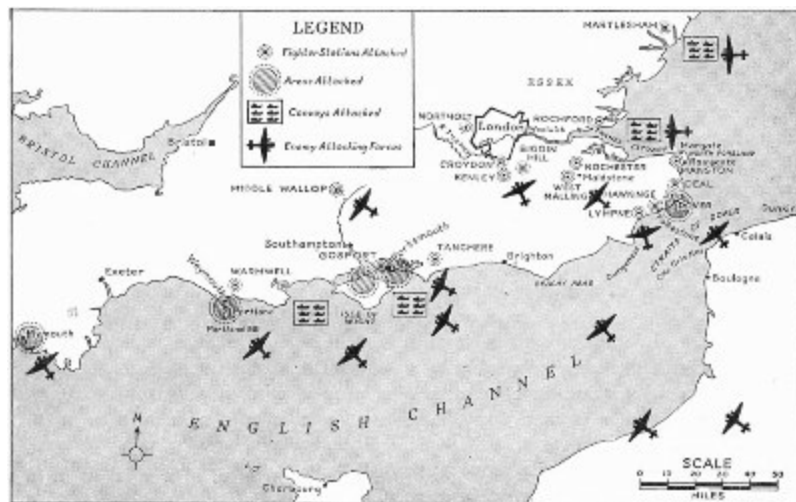
On 2 July German squadrons began regular daylight attacks against targets in Great Britain. From the 10th these attacks were designed principally to exhaust the British fighter force, for on that date the first really large enemy formation (70 aircraft) was employed. This date, then, marks the real opening of the battle.

On 10 July two large formations of enemy aircraft attempted to attack convoys off **Margate** and **Dover**. The larger attack was made by about twenty-four Dornier bombers escorted by forty Me109s and Me110s, the enemy's standard single-engined and twin-engined fighters. Aircraft from five **RAF** fighter squadrons scrambled to intercept this raid, but most of the fighters arrived after the bombers had left and

consequently fighting took place mainly between fighter and fighter. Only one enemy bomber was shot down. This aircraft was singled out by Pilot Officer D. G. Cobden, <sup>2</sup> who was leading a section of No. 74 Squadron Spitfires; it was the first kill for a New Zealander. Cobden led the eight-gun Spitfires into the attack at high speed and immediately picked out a straggling Dornier for an attack from astern. Black smoke poured from the starboard engine of the enemy aircraft, but at that moment Cobden, then alone, was attacked from above by Me109s, several of whose pilots combined to seriously damage his Spitfire. Despite this, Cobden was able to evade the enemy and make a landing with wheels up on a coastal airfield. The Dornier was claimed as destroyed. Altogether during the engagement seven enemy aircraft were shot down for the loss of one pilot, while the convoy lost only one 400-ton vessel.

The attacks on convoys on the 10th and the following day confirmed Air Chief Marshal Dowding's opinion that if the Channel convoys became the chief German objective a great strain would be put on the squadrons based near the South coast. Because of the small number of available squadrons, in comparison with the wide territory they were responsible for protecting, only small fighter escorts could be provided for the coastal convoys, for whose protection Fighter Command was responsible. Thus there was always the danger that an escort might be suddenly attacked by superior numbers, for although the radar stations usually detected approaching enemy formations, they did not always do so in time for the controllers to take effective action before bombing began. This was especially true in the region of the South coast. Enemy aircraft from the Cherbourg area could form up in the central Channel outside effective radar range, so that by the time a resolved track appeared on the operations room tables the raiders were already flying directly to their targets. Nor were the Germans lacking in versatility, for in quick succession they might alter their timing and direction of attack, or, having assembled a formidable force, they might wheel it away after the defending squadrons had scrambled, only to return half an hour later when the Spitfires and Hurricanes were landing and

refuelling.



THE BATTLE OF BRITAIN PHASE I: 10 July-18 August 1940  
*Attacks on Channel shipping and South Coast ports*

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For the next ten days the Germans used tactics similar to those already discussed, in that they launched two or three raids, suitably separated in time, either in the central Channel or the Straits. In every case the targets were convoys, and the attackers, having built up a strong force of aircraft over the French coast, moved quickly to the target without any attempt at concealment. Consequently the defending squadrons, arriving one by one over the area, were often too late to interfere with the bombers, who retired as quickly as possible, leaving their escort of Me109s and Me110s, who normally held the advantage of height, to act as rearguard. These conditions prevailed on the 19th when Fighter Command suffered unusually heavy casualties in beating off an attack on shipping in Dover Harbour by Junkers 87 dive-bombers. Defending fighters were late off the ground, and it was fifteen minutes after the first report of bombing had been received that nine Defiants of No. 141 Squadron came into the area. Three of these aircraft were captained by New Zealanders—Pilot Officers J. R. Gard'ner,<sup>3</sup> J. R. Kemp,<sup>4</sup> and R. Kidson.<sup>5</sup> The Defiants, each mounting a four-gun turret in the mid-dorsal position, were flying towards Cap Gris Nez when they were attacked at 5000 feet off **Folkestone** by a large number of escorting Me109 fighters. The turret fighters stood no chance against the initial



attack from out of the sun and almost immediately two Defiants were shot down. The fight then swung northwards. Hurricane pilots despatched to support the Defiants were prevented from reaching them by a wall of enemy fighters. In the subsequent fighting the Defiants' inferiority was sadly shown. Their free guns could not be brought to bear directly astern beneath their tails, and, profiting from the lessons of **Dunkirk** when the Defiants caused heavy casualties to the enemy, it was from this position that the German fighter pilots attacked. In this unfortunate action all three New Zealanders were shot down and only one, Gard'ner, was rescued from the sea. Altogether six of the Defiants were lost. After this engagement No. 141 Squadron was moved up to **Scotland**, well out of range of the Me109.

The events of the next few days indicated that the Germans were possibly not yet agreed on the policy of staying behind to fight after each attack had been made. Indeed on several occasions when Fighter Command aircraft were early in the air, strong German formations turned before the defenders. However, on 24 July the enemy launched heavy attacks on convoys both in the Straits and off **Portland** regardless of opposition.

No. 54 Squadron, a flight of which was commanded by Flight Lieutenant A. C. Deere, <sup>6</sup> and which also included Pilot Officer C. F. Gray <sup>7</sup> among its pilots, was heavily engaged throughout the day. The squadron regarded the operations as 'the biggest and most successful since **Dunkirk**'. In a morning patrol Gray and five other pilots distinguished themselves when, although heavily outnumbered, they beat off a German bombing attack on a convoy near **Dover**, forcing the enemy aircraft to jettison their bombs prematurely. Later that day Deere led the squadron through heavy rain to intercept eighteen Dornier 215s, escorted by at least two squadrons of fighters, which were attacking a convoy in the Thames Estuary. The enemy formation was first sighted flying up the Estuary at between 5000 and 10,000 feet. Deere immediately ordered one flight to attack some of the fighters while he led his section above after more Me109s. At that moment he was

attacked from the rear by nine enemy aircraft. Subsequently Deere reported:

I managed to stall turn on to their tails and fire a burst into the centre of the formation. Me109s then came down from above and a dogfight ensued. I had general wild bursts at various aircraft but was unable to get a decent bead because of constant attacks from behind. I managed, however, one long burst at an Me109 at close range and he went down with glycol pouring from his machine.

Meanwhile Gray was engaged with two of the enemy fighters. Having damaged the first, he set fire to the second and saw the German pilot jump by parachute and fall into the sea. Altogether under Deere's leadership the squadron was credited with five enemy aircraft definitely destroyed and a further nine probably destroyed or damaged. Only one pilot from the squadron was lost.

This testing phase had made it clear that the Germans were frequently able to bomb targets in the Straits before being intercepted and that the large protecting umbrella, plus the advantage of height which their fighters almost invariably enjoyed, gave them tactical superiority; but the main German advantage was that they could concentrate before an operation whilst Fighter Command's aircraft could not. Thus, intercepting Spitfire and Hurricane squadrons often found that they were each required to engage anything from 20 to 30 enemy aircraft. Against this were the willingness of the fighter pilots to accept any odds and to attack the enemy whenever and wherever possible, and the deadly effect of the eight-machine-gun armament of both Spitfires and Hurricanes against the German bombers—at that time unarmoured.

# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## THE ALL-OUT BLOW AGAINST FIGHTER COMMAND

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**BY THE END OF THE FIRST WEEK** in August the **Luftwaffe** had completed its preparations for mounting mass daylight attacks, and accordingly, in the next phase from the 8th onwards, it attempted nothing less than the complete elimination of Fighter Command. This ten-day period was one of the most crucial phases of the battle. Attacks on coastal towns and convoys were continued on an increased scale, and to these were added particular targets including radar stations, Fighter Command airfields, balloon barrages, and aircraft factories. It is clear from the tactics employed and from the objectives selected that the **Luftwaffe** was attempting to gain air superiority by exhausting and swamping the Fighter Command defences. During this phase the enemy used the Junkers 87 dive-bomber and, less often, the long-range Heinkel and Dornier bombers, to make preliminary attacks against coastal objectives in **Kent** to draw the fighter defence, followed some 30 to 40 minutes later by the main attack against ports or airfields on the South coast between Brighton and **Portland**. Of these tactics Air Vice-Marshal Park wrote:

**The main problem was to know which was the diversionary attack, and to hold sufficient squadrons in readiness to meet the main attack when this could be discerned from the very unreliable information received from the radar stations after they had been heavily bombed.**

**To meet the attacks against coastal objectives it was necessary to keep nearly all the readiness squadrons at forward airfields, such as Lympne, Mansion, Rochford, and Hawkinge, from which Air Vice-Marshal Park sent half his available squadrons, including the Spitfires, to engage the enemy fighters and the remainder to attack the enemy bombers flying at 11,000 to 13,000 feet. As the fighter screens to the main bombing formations flew in large unwieldy masses some 5000 to 10,000 feet above the bombers, the Spitfires had to climb to well over 20,000 feet to intercept them. Hence they rarely had the advantage of height. On the other hand, this fact often allowed fighter pilots to do severe damage to**

**the bombing force before general dogfighting developed between fighter and fighter.**

**The first really heavy attack on a land target since July was made on the morning of 11 August against [Portland](#). On this occasion the Nos. 10 and 11 Group controllers were in hardly any doubt as to the target, since three enemy forces were plotted in the central Channel on course for [Portland](#) and no convoy was in the area at the time. Accordingly, during the next fifteen minutes the greater part of eight squadrons was ordered to that area. Amongst these was No. 213 Hurricane Squadron from Exeter, led by Squadron Leader H. D. McGregor. <sup>8</sup> In the early stages the top cover of Messerschmitt fighters, which were some distance east of the main formation, was brought to battle by other squadrons, but it fell to McGregor to make the only interception of the bombers before they reached their target. He had been ordered to patrol at 10,000 feet and had just arrived over [Portland](#) when the enemy was sighted. He counted about fifty Junkers 88s and thirty Me109s between 10,000 and 15,000 feet and immediately attacked the head of the enemy formation. This attack was so successful that some of the bombers were compelled to jettison their bombs near Portland Bill, wide of any target. In reporting his own share in the action McGregor said:**

**Attacked Junkers 88 in leading section from beam and gave two-second burst and rear gunner stopped firing. Put a second burst in the starboard engine which caught fire and aircraft crashed in flames on the west side of Portland Bill....**

**That little very serious damage was done in this attack was largely due to the efforts of Squadron Leader McGregor's pilots, who altogether claimed seven enemy bombers and one fighter destroyed.**

**For the next few days there was intensive enemy activity between the Isle of Wight and the Thames Estuary. Targets attacked included radar stations, convoys, and coastal towns. According to a German account of the air war against Great Britain, 13 August was chosen as *Adlertag* (Eagle Day) and marked the opening of an all-out four-day**

offensive designed to smash the fighter defences in Southern England. Once this goal was reached the offensive was to be extended northwards, sector by sector, until all England was covered by day attacks and Fighter Command was irreparably broken. The way for invasion would then be open. It is interesting to note, however, that at this date (13 August) the **German High Command** were still undecided amongst themselves on important details of the invasion plan. It was the opinion of the Commander-in-Chief, **Navy**, that in view of the limited means available for naval warfare and transport, an invasion should be attempted only as a last resort if **Britain** could not be made to sue for peace in any other way. However, it is not at all certain that Reich Marshal Goering shared these pessimistic views, for on 15 August he launched a series of most highly co-ordinated and intensive attacks against England which were to result in the greatest number of German aircraft being destroyed by Fighter Command in any day throughout the entire course of the battle.

# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## THE GREATEST DAY—15 AUGUST 1940

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**THIS DAY** was outstanding in many respects. Five major operations were fought; the activity ranged over a front of 500 miles from **Plymouth** to the Tyne; the fighting continued all day and included, in the North-east, one particular victory which had a lasting result.

The first major attack was launched by two waves, totalling about 100 enemy aircraft, against the fighter station of Hawkinge, in Kent. Pilot Officer J. A. A. Gibson <sup>9</sup> led a section of No. 501 Squadron Hurricanes from Hawkinge to intercept the attack. Gibson sighted one formation of about twenty Junkers 87 dive-bombers approaching from the south, and attacking from out of the sun he sent one into the sea in flames. He then noticed other dive-bombers attacking his home airfield. Returning at speed he was in time to intercept two and damage one of them. Their rear gunners, however, set his Hurricane on fire, but, noticing that he was near the town of **Folkestone**, Gibson stayed with the aircraft in spite of the flames and steered it clear of the town before finally jumping from a height of 1000 feet. For his courage he was awarded an immediate DFC.

Then followed an unusual attack in that it was directed not against the South or South-east coasts but against targets in the North-east. The attack came shortly after noon and was split into two thrusts, one directed at Sunderland and Tynemouth and the other against the airfield at Driffield, 100 miles to the south. This raid was a rash tactical move on the part of the Germans, for the area attacked was well out of range of the Me109 and the long-range bombers had to be escorted by the twin-engined Me100, already proved to be no match for the British fighter pilots.

It was Air Chief Marshal Sir Hugh Dowding's opinion that:

The sustained resistance which they (the Germans) were meeting in South-east England probably led them to believe that fighter squadrons had been withdrawn wholly or in part from the North to meet the



attack... the contrary was soon apparent and the bombers received such a drubbing that the experiment was not repeated.

In fact, instead of having an easy passage, the Germans were met by nine squadrons of Spitfires and Hurricanes which considerably thinned their ranks.

Pilot Officer J. N. MacKenzie <sup>10</sup> was with one of the four squadrons which intercepted the main attack against the Tynemouth area. His squadron encountered an arrowhead formation of fifty bombers flying at 18,000 feet, escorted by forty Me110s a little astern and above. These escort fighters retained their formation when attacked and the combat resolved itself into a dogfight with the escort and a few loose bombers. MacKenzie singled out a Junkers 88 for attack and closed to within 80 yards of the enemy aircraft before breaking away. He last saw the Junkers entering cloud with smoke pouring from one engine.

The Germans cannot have been well pleased about the effectiveness of this raid, for in the Tyneside area no military damage was caused and industrial damage was insignificant. Meanwhile some 30 to 40 bombers and escorting fighters were attacking the aerodrome at Driffield. The airfield was extensively cratered and many buildings and hangars destroyed. But the fighter pilots exacted a heavy price from the Germans, for as a result of these attacks in the North-east, no fewer than fifty-six enemy aircraft of an attacking force of about three times that number were claimed destroyed. Not one British aircraft was lost although a few were damaged.

In the afternoon large formations of enemy aircraft attacked a fighter airfield and four radar stations in the South-east; an aircraft factory was also dive-bombed. This was followed by two attacks in the evening. The first was launched against Portsmouth and Plymouth and the Middle Wallop airfield by about thirty dive-bombers, escorted by approximately 100 fighters. Squadron Leader T. G. Lovell-Gregg <sup>11</sup> led No. 87 Hurricane Squadron, which included Flying Officers D. H. Ward <sup>12</sup> and K. W. Tait, <sup>13</sup> to intercept this raid and the ensuing combat was

described as the fiercest the squadron had experienced. The enemy fighters on being attacked formed themselves into two main defensive circles while the squadron set about them with good results. Squadron Leader Lovell-Gregg was shot down during this hectic engagement, but his loss was avenged by Ward and Tait, who each claimed the destruction of an Me110.

This attack against the South coast was hardly over when the pilots were called upon to intercept yet another heavy raid directed against an airfield in **Kent** and against Croydon aerodrome. The enemy succeeded in making the **Kent** airfield unserviceable for four days and also caused minor damage at Croydon. This latter attack was noteworthy as the first occasion when bombs were dropped in the **London** area, and also because all the aircraft which actually bombed the aerodrome were shot down. In intercepting this attack Flight Lieutenant Deere claimed an enemy fighter destroyed before he was himself shot down over Kent. He baled out at 1500 feet and escaped with a sprained wrist. This was the famous occasion when Deere, sideslipping his parachute to miss a farmhouse, landed in the middle of a fully laden plum tree and brought the whole crop to the ground. This tree was the only one in the orchard which still bore fruit and had been specially saved, a point which the irate farmer was not slow to point out to the New Zealander.

In all, as a result of the day's operations, it is now known that the **German Air Force** lost seventy-six aircraft. Fighter Command losses that day were thirty-four aircraft. In spite of this the enemy effort was only slightly less on the following day, when in three major attacks four Fighter Command airfields were heavily bombed.

On the 17th, despite the fact that good weather prevailed over England, there was a general lull in operations. The Luftwaffe's strenuous efforts to knock out Fighter Command ended on Sunday the 18th, when the Junkers 87 dive-bombers operated for the last time in any strength and **London's** anti-aircraft guns went into action for the first time. Again airfields and radar stations were the main targets; in all, three major attacks were made.

At Biggin Hill, where Pilot Officers W. S. Williams <sup>14</sup> and R. M. Trousdale <sup>15</sup> were stationed with No. 266 Squadron, the pilots were ordered off the ground shortly before their aerodrome was bombed and by determined attacks against the enemy force were able to mitigate substantially the severity of the attack, so that the only damage to the airfield was light cratering. Both the New Zealanders were engaged, Williams climbing back to 15,000 feet for a second attack after having chased an enemy fighter in a dive before opening fire and sending it crashing into the sea five miles from the French coast. There was an aftermath to this engagement, however, for having returned to their base to refuel, the Squadron's Spitfires were attacked on the ground and Trousdale's aircraft, amongst others, was destroyed.

These attacks brought this phase of the Battle of **Britain** to an end. The strain had been enormous. By 19 August ninety-four British pilots had been killed or were missing plus about sixty more or less seriously injured. During the period Fighter Command lost outright 183 aircraft, and although it is now known that 367 German aircraft were destroyed, the situation was serious and the ratio of losses much too high.

# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## THE ATTACK ON THE AIRFIELDS

## *THE ATTACK ON THE AIRFIELDS*

**IN THE FOLLOWING** five days there was none of the fire that had characterised the German effort throughout the preceding week. Indeed the Germans seemed to be resting after their exertions, and there is no doubt that the pause gave Fighter Command, too, a much-needed breathing space. Nevertheless, across the Channel the German commanders were not without hope of ultimate victory, for on 20 August the battle order of the German Commander-in-Chief was as follows:

**Continue the fight against the British Air Force until further notice with the aim of weakening the British fighter strength. The enemy is to be forced by ceaseless attacks to bring his fighter formations into operation....**

**In accordance with these instructions intensive operations were renewed by the Germans on 24 August, and for the next fortnight they sought by heavy attacks on airfields to the north and south of **London**, and on targets in the Thames Estuary, to clear the approaches to the capital.**

### *Above the Clouds*



HURRICANES ON PATROL

### **HURRICANES ON PATROL**



RE-ARMING AN EIGHT-GUN HURRICANE  
**RE-ARMING AN EIGHT-GUN HURRICANE**

PILOTS SCRAMBLING

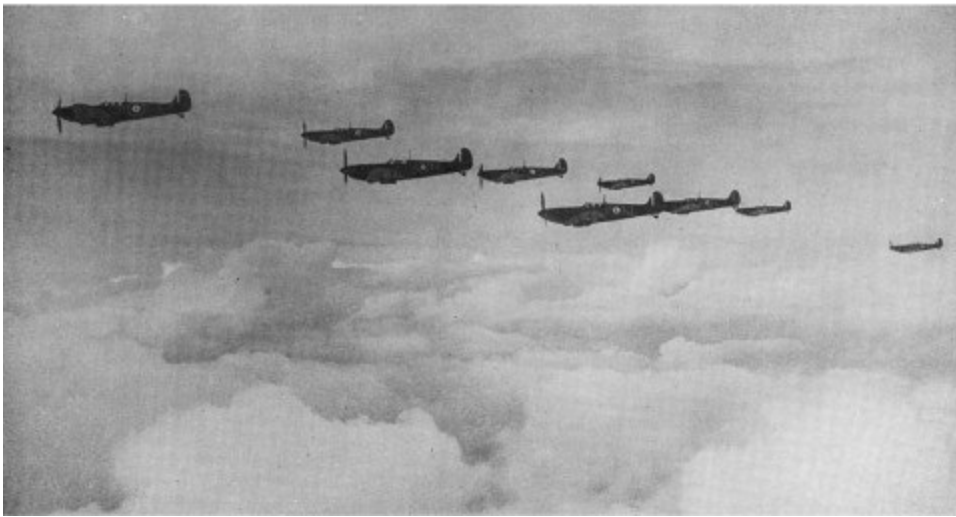


**PILOTS SCRAMBLING**



ADJUSTING PARACHUTE HARNESS  
**ADJUSTING PARACHUTE HARNESS**

SPITFIRES IN FORMATION



**SPITFIRES IN FORMATION**

## COMBAT

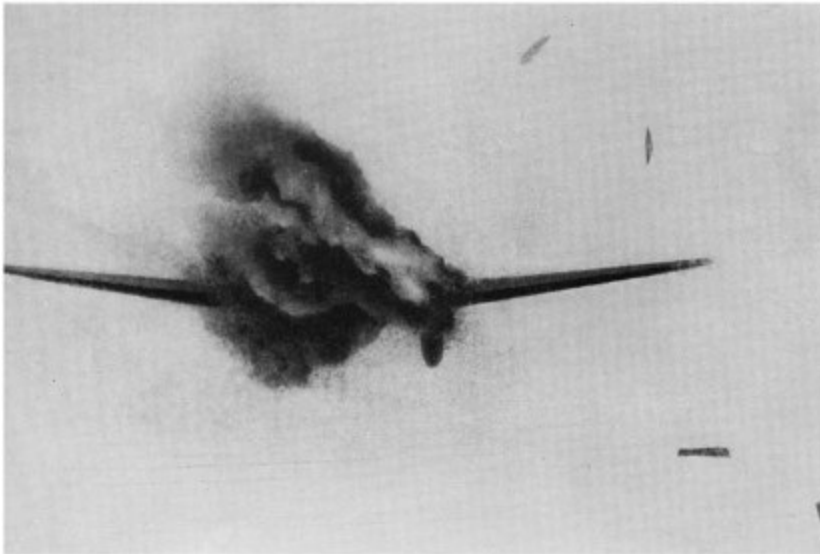


WAVES OF ENEMY AIRCRAFT—120 Plus over the Thames Estuary

**WAVES OF ENEMY AIRCRAFT—120 Plus over the Thames Estuary**



**RAF FIGHTERS IN PURSUIT**



EFFECTIVE FIRE AT  
CLOSE RANGE

**EFFECTIVE FIRE AT CLOSE RANGE**



ENEMY AIRCRAFT EXPLODING

**ENEMY AIRCRAFT EXPLODING**





**DAMAGE BY RAIDERS**  
A photograph taken from a German aircraft of the enemy attacks on oil storage tanks at Newhaven on the Thames on 7 August 1940

### **DAMAGE BY RAIDERS**

**A photograph taken from a German aircraft of the enemy attacks on oil storage tanks at Newhaven on the **Thames** on 7 August 1940**



A Heinkel over London on 7 August 1940

**A Heinkel over **London** on 7 August 1940**

COASTAL RADAR STATION



**COASTAL RADAR STATION**

OBSERVER CORPS POST



**OBSERVER CORPS POST**



HIS MAJESTY THE KING CONGRATULATES FLIGHT LIEUTENANT A. C. DEERE after decorating him with the Distinguished Flying Cross

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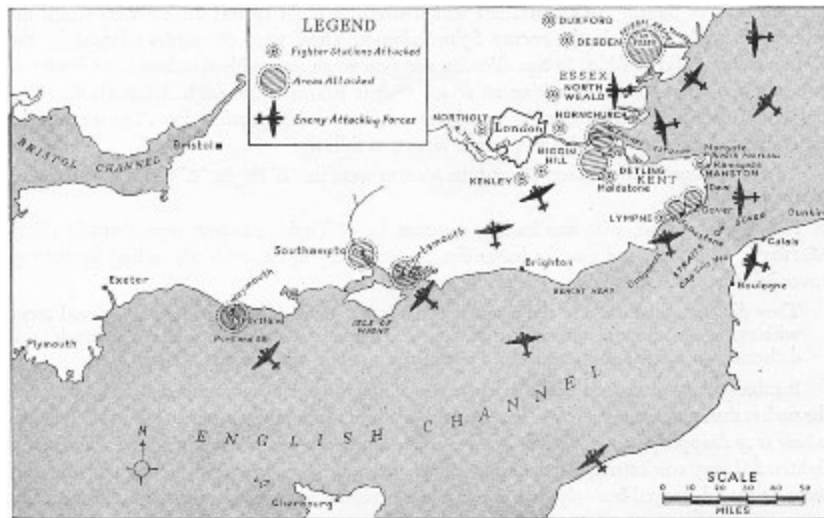
Pilot Officer C. F. GRAY

**Pilot Officer C. F. GRAY**



Air Vice-Marshals K. R. PARK

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PHASE II: 24 August-5 September 1940 Attacks on Airfields covering London

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On a typical day in which heavy attacks were launched at intervals, activity over the **Dover** Straits was almost constant. Out of a maze of plots in the operations room would emerge anything from three to six formations heading for the coast of Kent. The amount of warning thus available to the defenders was limited—indeed it was remarkable that in this phase the Germans showed little interest in the highly important radar stations which were thus allowed to recuperate somewhat from the damage they had received during the previous phase—and the Germans further added to the difficulties of identification by splitting into several groups immediately the coast was crossed. Moreover, their general bombing tactics changed during this phase, in that instead of using

massed formations of bombers, the enemy used small formations of 20 to 30 aircraft, strongly escorted, and flying higher than previously. Often the bombers were completely boxed in by close fighter escorts, a number of which flew slightly above on a flank or in rear, while others flew slightly above and ahead, with a third formation of fighters weaving in amongst the bombers.

To deal with these new tactics Air Vice-Marshal Park arranged that some of his fighter squadrons should meet the enemy as far forward as possible. Other squadrons, including reinforcements from the neighbouring sectors of Nos. 10 and 12 Groups, patrolled the all-important fighter airfields near and around **London**. he instructed his controllers to send the Spitfire squadrons against the higher fighter screens and the Hurricanes to attack the bombers and their escorts, but in practice these roles were often reversed, much depending on the state of readiness of the squadrons at the time an attack developed.

On occasions Squadron Commanders would send one flight against the bombers whilst the other attempted to contain the enemy fighter aircraft. These were the tactics adopted by the Commanding Officer of No. 87 Squadron on the 25th when he led his squadron from Exeter to intercept 100 enemy aircraft making an attack against Warmwell airfield. Although six other fighter squadrons were airborne in the area this squadron made interception alone. The trend of the action is admirably described by a squadron report, as follows:

‘B’ Flight went for the Junkers 88s and the Me110s went for ‘B’ Flight. ‘A’ Flight then attacked the Me110s.

Flying Officer Tait, who was leading a section in ‘A’ Flight, attacked approximately thirty Me110s at 18,000 feet and saw the leader fire two red Very lights, evidently calling for the top cover of Me109s to come down. His report continues:

They did. Attacked one 110 trying to enter a vicious circle. After three bursts he dived away with one engine stopped and crashed into the sea.

**Attacked a 109 from directly above with full deflection—a Spitfire also attacked it from the beam. The 109 crashed on land.**

**It subsequently transpired that this squadron, although heavily outnumbered, had accounted for no less than nine enemy aircraft. In spite of their losses the bombers got through to Warmwell, where they dropped twenty to thirty bombs, doing damage to hangars and buildings. The enemy fighters at heavy cost carried out their duty of protecting the bombers: thirty-six German fighters were claimed destroyed but only four bombers were claimed to have been shot down in the entire engagement.**

**It was during this phase that Flight Lieutenant Deere and Pilot Officer Gray established themselves as outstanding fighter pilots. Both had been decorated a few days previously, Deere receiving a bar to the DFC he won at **Dunkirk**. In the ten days to 3 September, Gray claimed no less than seven victims. Deere also had numerous successful combats and on several occasions led his squadron into battle. In addition he had two narrow escapes, being bombed on the ground while taking off from Hornchurch, and once again being forced to bale out, an art at which he was rapidly becoming expert.**

**Many of these combats were in direct defence of the vital airfields protecting **London**, against which the Germans turned their full attention from the 28th. On the serviceability of these airfields depended the efficiency of the defences, and it needed all the Group Commander's skill to beat off the attacks. One method instituted about this time which aided the fighter controllers in their task of keeping track of enemy formations was the 'sighting report'. This meant that pilots were given permission to break radio silence and transmit the position of the enemy as soon as they were sighted. Later, single high-flying Spitfires were placed on patrol for this purpose. In the air Squadron Commanders were experimenting with new methods of attack to counteract the rear armour which the Germans were fitting to their fighters and bombers. The head-on attack was thus evolved and, as the following example shows, was used with striking success on the 30th by**

**Pilot Officer W. H. Hodgson <sup>16</sup> and other pilots of No. 85 Hurricane Squadron.**

**All through the early morning of that day the Germans had simulated attacks, thereby necessitating wearying standing patrols over fighter airfields. However, by 10.30 a.m. it was obvious that the enemy was preparing in earnest and accordingly upwards of nine fighter squadrons were ordered into the air. The weather was fine and clear, although there was some cloud between 5000 and 7000 feet. Altogether between 150 and 200 aircraft participated in this attack. Part of this force crossed the coast near Dungeness and steered north-west. Within a few minutes it had been intercepted by No. 85 Squadron pilots, who reported that it consisted of about fifty Heinkel 111s at 16,000 feet, with numerous escort fighters still higher. The Squadron Commander had previously led his pilots inland well in front of the Heinkels, before turning about so as to make a diving head-on attack out of the sun. These tactics were extremely effective for the bomber formation was dispersed, many jettisoning their bombs. In this engagement Hodgson shot down two escorting Me110s, probably destroyed a third, and also damaged a Heinkel 111. Hodgson in reporting the combat said that in the initial head-on attack he fired at a Heinkel 111 which broke away and disappeared. His report continues:**

**I then pulled up to 23,000 feet, dived on a straggling Me110 and gave a long burst from the beam through to line astern.... I pulled away and climbed to 25,000 feet and dived on another straggler and did the same attack with the same result. I then climbed up to 26,000 feet and dived through a circle of Me110s and pulled up underneath one. I shot into his belly at about 100 yards, closing to 50 yards range, and he rolled over with white smoke pouring out from underneath him and went down in a controlled glide. I had to break away as I had run out of ammunition and about seven Me110s dived on me so I hit out for home base....**

**As a result of this day's operations thirty-seven German aircraft were destroyed. But twenty-six Fighter Command aircraft were lost and**



fourteen pilots killed or wounded. This was a severe blow to the fighter strength, especially at a time when losses in pilots and aircraft substantially exceeded the reinforcements available. In respect of aircraft, the needs of the squadrons were being met by using reserves built up during quiet periods, so that although the gross output was not keeping pace with the casualties, the supply of aircraft never became a factor limiting the scale of operations. It was the supply of pilots that caused most concern, for at the beginning of September there was an average deficiency of about ten operational pilots in each Fighter Command squadron, although No. 11 Group squadrons were maintained at an average of nineteen operational pilots. \* In fact, by 6 September there were no fresh squadrons available in the country to replace the battered units serving in the South-east and the Commander-in-Chief was compelled as a desperate expedient to institute the 'stabilisation scheme'. This scheme, by committing a number of squadrons in back areas to the task of training new pilots to operational standard, enabled squadrons in No. 11 Group and on its immediate flanks to be kept supplied with trained replacement pilots without the necessity for moving entire units out of the battle area.

This phase then, marked the crisis of the Battle of **Britain**, a point which was made by Air Vice-Marshal Park, who later wrote:

There was a critical period between 28 August and 5 September when the damage to sector stations and our ground organisation was having a serious effect on the fighting efficiency of the fighter squadrons. Had the enemy continued his heavy attacks, the fighter defences of **London** would have been in a parlous state during the last critical phase when heavy attacks have been directed against the capital.

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\* The establishment of a fighter squadron was 26 pilots.

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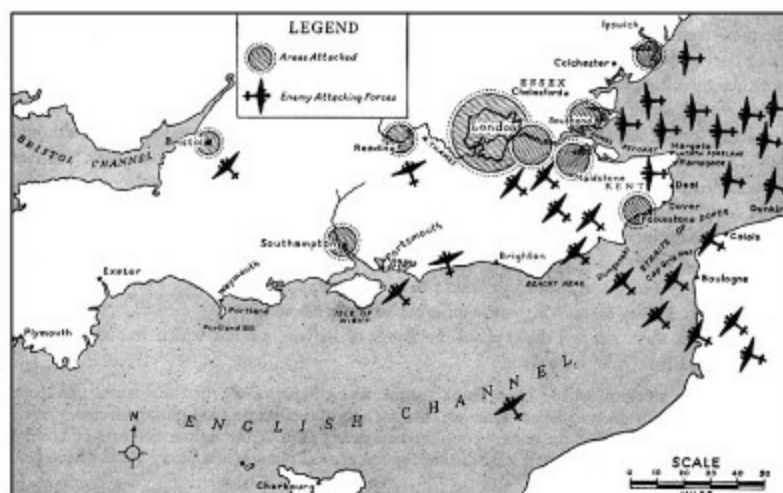
# EPIISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## THE SWITCH TO LONDON

## THE SWITCH TO LONDON

ON SATURDAY, 7 September, the enemy turned to the heavy attack of **London** by day. Throughout the next three weeks the capital was subjected to a series of vicious attacks both by night and by day. The former were designed specifically to do as much damage as possible, especially to the vital rail communications, while the daylight attacks, by keeping the people under a state of almost constant alert, were intended to disorganise life and industry to the highest possible extent.

It had already been envisaged that the Germans would attempt an invasion within the next two weeks and that control of the air over South-east England would be vital to the operation. But although increased attacks were expected, the switch of the main German offensive to an attack on **London** came as something of a surprise. Nevertheless, while the previous phase was still being fought, Air Vice-Marshal Park had made preparations to counter the expected German onslaught. His plan was that the German attack should be met by as strong a defending force as possible between the coast and the sector stations near **London**, and that, provided sufficient warning was available, fighter squadrons were to go into battle in pairs. Hurricanes were ordered to engage the bombers, and Spitfires the higher fighter screen. These arrangements had their first test in the evening of 7 September.



PHASE III: 7-27 September 1940 Day and night offensive against London

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The third phase of the battle opened with a series of reconnaissance raids during the morning and a light fighter-bomber attack on coastal airfields. The remainder of the day was quiet, and it was not until about 4 p.m. that a German force was first reported to be gathering over the French coast. During the next thirty minutes the development in strength of the attacking force proceeded, paralleled by the periodic despatch of fighter squadrons to the **Kent** and **London** areas. In their operations rooms the fighter controllers were faced with the heavy responsibility of deciding from the mass of information displayed on their plotting tables when the attack would develop, in what direction it would be aimed, and which of the several German formations in the air would execute it. The picture resolved itself somewhat by half past four when it became obvious that four formations of enemy aircraft intended attacking over a wide front from Beachy Head to the North Foreland. Accordingly, by 5 p.m. no fewer than twenty-one detachments had been sent into the air, most of them to patrol airfields near **London**.

Almost immediately Flight Lieutenant J. A. A. Gibson was engaged with No. 501 Squadron against a force of over 150 enemy aircraft, but he was the only pilot to make a claim and that an inconclusive one. The bombers then flew up the **Thames** and bombed targets at Woolwich, doing heavy damage. On the way back these aircraft were engaged by at least seven squadrons. Flying Officer B. J. G. Carbury,<sup>17</sup> leading a section of No. 603 Squadron Spitfires, reported waves of bombers escorted by fighters above, around, and below them. His first attack was against an Me109 which burst into flames, then, having climbed into the sun, he saw a string of fighters below him. He made two attacks on a straggler from this formation and left it in a dive, streaming glycol. Climbing again to 30,000 feet, Carbury dived through a formation of German aircraft, spraying them with bullets, but as he did not see any damage, the New Zealander, although short of petrol, oxygen, and ammunition, once more climbed up and attacked two formations of enemy fighters. Again he fired at a straggler and saw it burst into

flames. Of seven enemy aircraft claimed destroyed or damaged by his squadron, Carbury was credited with three.

However, at this time, while one third of the fighter defences was engaged with the retreating enemy, other bomb-carrying formations were approaching East London. The second wave were all engaged shortly after crossing the coast, but in the main the enemy was undeterred and at least four formations attacked **London**. The main weight of the German attack was concentrated on the East End dock areas about six o'clock. Intercepting this force as it retired, Pilot Officer K. A. Lawrence, <sup>18</sup> of No. 234 Spitfire Squadron, damaged a Dornier 17 bomber. He then found himself alone, but in spite of this he attacked a formation of twelve Me109s and set one on fire. This attack was typical of many which took place all over South-east England during the day.

Many squadrons after being engaged were given time only to land, refuel, and re-arm before being sent up again in an effort to stem the hordes of German aircraft which made the evening hideous with their noise and filled the streets of the East End of **London** with death and destruction. From the ground below Londoners looked up into the blue sky with amazement as they watched the twisting, snaking vapour trails tracing a lace-like pattern above their city. Sometimes they could see the black specks at the head of the snowy streaks; more often the sound and sight of the drama being enacted high above was denied them, except when an aircraft—friend or foe—spun lazily down from the heights, or dived at full throttle flaming like a torch, to crash and explode in a shower of blazing particles in a park or once-peaceful street.

The fighter pilots fought gallantly to stem the enemy advance and although greatly outnumbered they achieved success in the numbers of enemy aircraft destroyed. In those early September days, none of them knew the outcome of the battle or where the enemy would strike next. Day after day they ran to their Spitfires and Hurricanes—kept serviceable by the ground crews in spite of bombing and strafing attacks and lack of sleep—and flew into battle against the hundreds of enemy aircraft whose black crosses filled the skies above them. After dark,

while **London** blazed, they slept uneasily, often awakened by the crash of nearby bombs. Long before dawn they were at dispersal, ready and waiting for the telephone to ring, telling them to 'Scramble' and fly into battle once more.

Such was their success that only on 7 September did the Germans succeed in breaking through to **London** in strength by day. The same success could not be claimed by night, however, and the defence of the capital fell mainly upon the anti-aircraft gunners. At this time, the interception of night raiders by fighter aircraft was rare. Although airborne radar aids had been introduced to the Service and every effort was being made to perfect night fighting methods, such were the difficulties of night interception that during the fortnight preceding 7 September, in spite of a nightly average of thirty-one fighter sorties, only three enemy aircraft were claimed destroyed by the fighters. Two of these, a Heinkel 111 and a Dornier 17, were destroyed on one patrol by Pilot Officer M. J. Herrick, <sup>19</sup> one of a small group of New Zealanders engaged in night fighting. This dual success was certainly not a typical contemporary example; it was a unique achievement. Herrick was flying a **Blenheim** of No. 25 Squadron fitted with airborne radar, but conditions seem to have favoured visual interception and the radar was not used. Nor did he receive much help from ground control, for a few minutes after taking off his radio became unserviceable. The New Zealander sighted both enemy aircraft illuminated by searchlights, and, having despatched the first with a five-second burst, he reported his subsequent actions as follows:

Immediately afterwards another enemy aircraft was illuminated and after chasing for about 10 minutes I got within range and opened fire at about 400 yards. I then fired several short bursts with the range decreasing and obtained a good deflection shot. The enemy aircraft seemed to halt and waver in the air and I overshot as I had used all my remaining ammunition. Then the searchlights turned on me and I could see no more. As I overtook the enemy aircraft, I noticed that it was falling to pieces and that both engines were smoking badly. My rear

**gunner fired in both actions....**

**The next morning the remains of both these enemy aircraft were found. Herrick was immediately awarded the DFC for this action.**

**The week which followed was characterised by the fact that, particularly in the **London** area but also elsewhere in the country, most of the German bombs fell at night. This was significant, for in expecting a heavier assault to develop Fighter Command had been facing the prospect of intensified attacks in daylight with the attendant continuance of heavy damage to the airfields and a high casualty rate amongst its pilots. As it transpired, although daylight bombing attacks continued in the South-east, they were, with the exception of those on the 15th, not comparable with the great assault on the 7th, nor even with the previous attacks on the airfields.**

**On 15 September the **German Air Force** made what was probably its greatest concentrated effort to destroy Fighter Command. The Prime Minister described the day as ‘the most brilliant and fruitful of any fought upon a large scale up to that date by the fighters of the **RAF**’, and went on to say that bearing in mind the heavy casualties already caused to the enemy's air strength, superior though it was in numbers, the country could ‘wait the decision of this prolonged air battle with sober but increasing confidence.’**

**Although it has since been established that only about one third the number of enemy aircraft claimed destroyed on that day were in fact lost by the Germans, it is still likely that 15 September will remain as the day which turned the tide of the battle. It was remarkable for the success of Air Vice-Marshal Park's plans for meeting the enemy as far forward as possible. This was accomplished because the Germans, by using huge masses of bomber aircraft, took over half an hour to fly the 60 miles between the coast and the outskirts of **London**. Thus the defenders received an unusually long warning of each attack. This was especially true of the first attack, when the controller at No. 11 Group was given time to group ten squadrons into Wings and also to assemble**

reinforcements from adjacent Groups before the enemy crossed the coast. Many interceptions were made as the Germans approached on a zigzag course over **Kent**, so much so that a five-squadron Wing from Duxford, No. 12 Group, was forced to delay its attack until the No. 11 Group squadrons had cleared away. This enemy force was only lightly escorted and for once the defending fighters had numerical superiority. As previously arranged, the Hurricanes from Duxford attacked the bombers while the Spitfires made for the fighter cover, and, although most of the latter broke away and abandoned their charges, Flight Lieutenant W. G. Clouston,<sup>20</sup> who was leading one of the Spitfire squadrons, was able to attack an Me110 which he claimed to have destroyed. In general the Germans were very roughly handled, as on their way inland they were attacked by eleven squadrons of No. 11 Group and then by the mass Wing from Duxford. During the retirement four more fighter squadrons made interception. Significantly, most of the bombs that fell during this attack were dropped about the same time that combats were taking place.

During the second attack later in the day the Germans did more damage with their bombs, for owing to the fact that a shorter warning was available, only half of the intercepting squadrons were airborne before the Germans crossed the coast. Thus some of the fighters did not engage until the enemy were over South London, which became a bombing and a fighting area at the same time. In intercepting this attack several New Zealanders had successful combats, which can be illustrated by a few examples.

Pilot Officer G. M. Simpson,<sup>21</sup> of No. 229 Squadron, attacked, with other Hurricanes of the Northolt Wing, some thirty Heinkel 111s at 20,000 feet. After he and other members of his squadron had made an attack on one of the bombers, it crash-landed on West Malling airfield, to be joined a few moments later by Flight Lieutenant M. V. Blake,<sup>22</sup> who was compelled to make a forced landing on the same airfield with his windscreen covered in black oil as a result of a bullet in his oil pipe.

About the same time Pilot Officers H. P. Hill<sup>23</sup> and J. N. MacKenzie



were patrolling Hornchurch in Spitfires of the **Biggin Hill Wing** when a large enemy formation was sighted. MacKenzie set fire to the port engine of a bomber before it escaped into cloud and claimed it a 'probable'. Hill took part in an attack on a Dornier and saw one of the crew bale out, then in quick succession he destroyed three Heinkel 111s. Of the first he reports:

I carried out three beam attacks from slightly ahead and above, breaking away at 50 yards... this aircraft crashed in the edge of a wood and exploded.

The second Heinkel landed wheels up on **Maidstone** airfield after two attacks by the New Zealander. He then climbed again and his report continues:

As I was about to enter cloud saw a Heinkel 111 coming through. I carried out two beam attacks, also one stern attack, and the enemy aircraft finally crashed in a block of houses near Rochester.

As a result of the day's attacks 174 enemy aircraft were claimed destroyed by Fighter Command. Even at the time this figure was considered rather high, and it has since been established that fifty-six enemy aircraft were actually destroyed. In fairness to the integrity of the fighter pilots it is worth remembering that, considering the enormous numbers of aircraft engaged in combat and the wide area over which the battle raged, it was quite possible that several British pilots, unknown to one another, had engaged one and the same victim. Mr. Churchill in revealing that throughout the battle the defences got two to one of the Germans, instead of three to one as was the contemporary opinion, was content to say, 'But this was enough'. The German reaction to the events of 15 September is apparent from the following entry which was made in the German War Diary:

The enemy **Air Force** is still by no means defeated; on the contrary it shows increasing activity. The weather situation as a whole does not permit us to expect a period of calm.... The Fuehrer therefore decides to



postpone 'Sea Lion' \* indefinitely.

In fact **Hitler** did not procrastinate much longer. On 12 October he postponed the whole invasion plan until the spring of 1941.

Meanwhile from 16 to 26 September both the nature and scale of enemy day offensive operations underwent a change. In the main the weight of attack was reduced and there was ushered in a new phase of air fighting in which the Germans began to operate what were essentially offensive fighter sweeps. This was not to say, however, that enemy bombers were no longer seen, although they were used to a lesser extent. Concentration on **London** was less marked and attention was paid to targets in the South-west, including Southampton and **Bristol**, where an airfield and aircraft factory were attacked. Nevertheless, although during the following week the weight of attack by day in terms of bombs dropped was not high, the Germans continued to simulate large attacks, and although these were mostly high-flying fighter sweeps, they necessitated the same scale of interception by the fighter pilots as for a major bombing raid. For example, the Command as a whole made as many sorties on the 23rd, when the Germans launched little more than fighter sweeps, as on the 15th. Meanwhile the blitz of **London** was continued nightly by an average force of between 150 and 300 long-range bombers.

The last heavy daylight raid of the month was on the 27th. In all, four attacks were made, three of them against **London**. Little damage was done to the capital and altogether the Germans lost fifty-five aircraft. This was the last of the great daylight attacks on **London**. It can be said to have marked the failure of the **German Air Force** to prepare the way for invasion.

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\* The code name for the invasion of England. This decision was made on 17 September.

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# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## THE EBB OF BATTLE

## ***THE EBB OF BATTLE***

**THE LOSSES** incurred during the heavy daylight attacks in the previous phase precluded a continuation of this type of offensive, and thereafter enemy long-range bombers were less frequently employed by day. The month was characterised by the switch to high-level fighter- bomber attacks by Me109s, though long-range bombers continued to be used at night, mainly against **London** and the great arms centres in the Midlands. In addition, a few single aircraft were used in daylight to attack the most important industrial keypoints in the country, particularly the aircraft industry. These attacks were in keeping with **Hitler's** policy that the British must continue to believe he was preparing an attack on a broad front.

Of all the tactics used by the Germans those of October were the most difficult to counter. Because of the inability of radar control to give good warning of very high-flying raids, and of the **Observer Corps** to track them over land, Air Vice-Marshal Park was again forced to change his tactics during this phase and to maintain standing patrols by pairs of squadrons at 15,000 feet in all weather suitable for attacks. As soon as an attack developed, these fighters were ordered to 30,000 feet to contain the enemy's highest fighters whilst additional squadrons climbed to altitude. 'This cut at the roots of the Fighter Command system,' wrote the Commander-in-Chief, 'which was designed to ensure economy of effort by keeping aircraft on the ground except when required to make an interception.'

The New Zealanders, of whom there were now about seventy-five in the Command, some forty of these in No. 11 Group, flew on many and varied patrols and interceptions during the month and several of them had successful combats. On 2 October Pilot Officer J. S. Smith, <sup>24</sup> of No. 151 Squadron, was on local flying practice when he was vectored \* on to a lone Heinkel 111 which he chased through cloud and finally shot down into the sea off Skegness. On another occasion Flying Officer Carbury shot down an Me109 from 25,000 feet. This aircraft went straight into

the ground. The following day the same pilot at 33,000 feet shot down one Me109 into the Channel and then attacked another which he saw crash on the beach at **Dunkirk**. Carbury's prowess as a fighter pilot was recognised by the award of the DFC and bar in the field, this double award constituting a unique achievement for a New Zealander within the period of the battle.

On 12 October Pilot Officer P. W. Rabone <sup>25</sup> was leading a section of No. 145 Squadron Hurricanes when he was attacked from out of the sun by two Me109s. He turned to attack the second Messerschmitt and found himself in a tight circle with both enemy aircraft, in which position they flew for some twenty seconds. Eventually one enemy aircraft made the mistake of breaking out of the circle:

'As he did so,' Rabone later reported, 'I delivered a burst of two seconds from 100 yards range on the port quarter. The Me109 appeared to explode in the air, no black smoke was seen but the plane spun downwards.'

Rabone was then attacked by the other Messerschmitt and felt bullets hitting his aircraft, but by violent evasive tactics he shook off his attacker and at the same time saw his first adversary dive into the sea off Dungeness.

The success of such combats was due in no small measure to the fact that Air Vice-Marshal Park was able to adjust his tactics and interception methods to meet each change in the enemy's plans. This was a deciding factor in the battle and earned him well merited praise from his Commander-in-Chief, for although tactical *control* was delegated to Groups, tactical *methods* were normally laid down by the Command. There was no time for consultation during periods of intense fighting, however, and the Air Officer Commanding No. 11 Group acted from day to day mainly on his own initiative. This indefatigable man directed his few fighter squadrons throughout the entire course of the battle with admirable skill and courage. Yet, whenever a lull relieved him from his operations room he liked nothing better than to continue

**with the job by climbing into his own Hurricane and flying over the battle area. Often he would land at one of his airfields to see for himself how his fighter pilots were standing up to the battle.**

**In December Air Vice-Marshal Park was made a Companion of the Order of the Bath for his 'conspicuous success' while commanding the fighter defences in the world's first great air battle.**

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**\* An order to the pilot by radio telephone from the Controller giving a course to steer and height to fly to intercept the enemy.**

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# EPIISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## IN RETROSPECT

**WITH THE END** of October the Battle of **Britain** as a day battle was over. The night attacks on **London** were continued by large numbers of enemy aircraft on every night in October, but for the day-fighter pilot the emphasis was on preparing for a renewal of the battle in the spring, for it was obvious that the Germans had lost their chance of invasion and could not think of it again until the winter was over.

The Battle of **Britain** was a turning point. The Germans had intended to invade **Britain** and as a prerequisite needed supremacy in the air above the beaches where their troops must land. The destruction of Fighter Command was therefore imperative. It is fairly certain that the Germans used all that they could for this battle, yet failed to win it. Flushed with their victories over **Poland, Norway, Denmark, France,** and the Low Countries they launched an assault which they thought would result in the conquest of England. Against them Air Chief Marshal Dowding pitted his wits and the fifty-two **RAF** fighter squadrons. Over the main area of battle the small fighter force was directed by Air Vice-Marshal Park against the waves of German bombers and fighters. Undaunted by almost overwhelming odds, the fighter pilots flew into the skies over the Southern and Home Counties and with skill and courage broke the attack and turned the **Luftwaffe** before them time and again.

On 7 September Goering's pride and joy—his **Luftwaffe**—retired almost completely from the day battle. It had had enough. For the time being the threat of a Nazi occupation of the quiet villages of England, from being almost a certainty had become only a remote possibility. The pilots from England, Occupied Europe, and the Dominions had vanquished a foe vastly superior to themselves in numbers, and the Battle for **Britain** was won. Altogether during the period of the battle the **German Air Force** lost 1733 aircraft destroyed. Fighter Command losses were 915 aircraft.

For the first time the **German Air Force** was defeated. Until then it had been looked upon as invincible, and the pride of the German people

in the **Luftwaffe** received a shattering blow. The **German Air Force** never fully recovered its lost prestige. It undoubtedly lost the best of its pilots and aircrews and this materially affected its efficiency and thrust. The **Battle of Britain** may therefore be regarded as the beginning of the end of the **German Air Force**.

During the battle nearly 100 New Zealanders served with **Fighter Command**. Many of them had joined the **Royal Air Force** in the days of peace, but even at the start of the battle a few members of the **Royal New Zealand Air Force** had reached fighter squadrons. By 31 October, of the seventy-eight New Zealand pilots actually serving with **Fighter Command** squadrons, no fewer than thirty were members of the **RNZAF**. During the battle fifteen New Zealanders were killed on operations. They never knew that their efforts had helped to turn the tide, nor could they imagine the **Typhoons** and **Tempests** and **Mosquitoes** that their successors were later to fly in their hundreds over **Occupied France** and **Europe**—no longer on the defensive but openly seeking the enemy above his home ground. All these things that were to come as **Fighter Command** grew in strength were the direct result of the high example and devotion to duty of 'The Few', who by their deeds delivered **Britain** from an indescribable tyranny and opened the way to the final and irrevocable defeat of **Nazi Germany**.

**NEW ZEALANDERS IN FIGHTER COMMAND KILLED  
ON OPERATIONS 10 JULY - 31 OCTOBER 1940**

	<i>Squadron</i>
39957 Pilot Officer J. H. L. A LLEN	151
41552 Pilot Officer D. G. C OB DEN	74
41924 Pilot Officer C. H. H IGH T	234
41847 Pilot Officer H. P. H ILL	92
41850 Pilot Officer J. R. K EMP	141
41297 Pilot Officer R. K IDSON	141
29244 Squadron Leader T. G. L OVELL-G REGG	87
36272 Pilot Officer E. O RGIAS	23
36193 Flight Lieutenant J. A. P ATERSON, MBE	92
41481 Flying Officer G. M. S IMPSON	229



<b>40651 Flying Officer K. V. W</b> ENDEL	<b>504</b>
<b>42173 Pilot Officer W. S. W</b> ILLIAMS	<b>266</b>
<b>40920 Sergeant D. E. H</b> UGHES	<b>600</b>
<b>391868 Sergeant L. A. W. R</b> ASMUSSEN	<b>264</b>
<b>40197 Sergeant R. B. M. Y</b> OUNG	<b>264</b>

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# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

### *BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES*

<sup>1</sup> Air Chief Marshal Sir Keith R. PARK, GCB, KBE, MC and bar, DFC, Croix de Guerre; **RAF** (retd); born **Thames**, 15 Jun 1892; in First World War served in **Egypt**, **Gallipoli**, and **France** in NZ Field Artillery (1914-15) and Royal Field Artillery (1915-16); wounded **Somme**, Oct 1916; seconded to Royal Flying Corps Jan 1917; permanent commission **RAF**, 1919; Senior Air Staff Officer, HQ Fighter Command, 1938-40; commanded No. 11 Group, Fighter Command, Apr 1940-Jan 1941; AOC **RAF**, **Egypt**, Jan-Jun 1942; AOC **RAF**, **Malta**, Jun 1942-Dec 1943; AOC-in-C, **Middle East**, Dec 1943-Dec 1944; Allied Air C-in-C, South-East **Asia**, Dec 1944-Jul 1946.

<sup>2</sup> Pilot Officer D. G. COBDEN; **RAF**; born **Christchurch**, 11 Aug 1914; killed on active service, 11 Aug 1940.

<sup>3</sup> Squadron Leader J. R. GARDNER, m.i.d.; **RAF**; **England**; draughting cadet; born **Dunedin**, 14 Jun 1918; wounded 19 Jul 1940.

<sup>4</sup> Pilot Officer J. R. KEMP; clerk; born **Napier**, 14 Aug 1914; killed on active service, 19 Jul 1940.

<sup>5</sup> Pilot Officer R. KIDSON; **RAF**; born **Wellington**, 7 May 1914; killed on active service, 19 Jul 1940.

<sup>6</sup> Wing Commander A. C. DEERE, DSO, OBE, DFC and bar, DFC (US), Croix de Guerre; **RAF**; **England**; born **Auckland**, 12 Dec 1917; commanded 602 Fighter Squadron, 1941; Wing Leader, Biggin Hill, 1943; Wing Commander No. 84 Group, 1944-45; commanded **RAF Station**, **Duxford**, 1945-46; wounded five times.

<sup>7</sup> Wing Commander C. F. GRAY, DSO, DFC and two bars; **RAF**; **Washington**; born **Christchurch**, 9 Nov 1914; farmer; commanded 403,

616, 64, and 81 Fighter Squadrons, Sep 1941-May 1943; Wing Commander and Fighter Wing Leader, **Malta, Sicily, and Europe**, Jun 1943-Feb 1945; commanded RAF Station, Skeabrae, 1945; Directorate of Air Foreign Liaison, **Air Ministry**, 1947-49; British Joint Services Mission, **Washington**, 1949—.

<sup>8</sup> Air Commodore H. D. McGREGOR, CBE, DSO, Legion of Merit (US); **RAF**; **Washington**; born Wairoa, 15 Feb 1910; commanded 33 and 213 Fighter Squadrons, 1939-40; Group Captain, Operations, **Mediterranean Air Command**, Apr 1943-Jan 1944; Allied Deputy Director of Operations, Intelligence and Plans in North Africa and **Italy**, 1944; AOC Levant, 1945-46; Planning Staff of North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, **Washington**, 1949—.

<sup>9</sup> Squadron Leader J. A. A. GIBSON, DSO, DFC; **RAF**; born Brighton, England, 24 Aug 1916; commanded 15 ( **RNZAF**) Squadron, 1943-44.

<sup>10</sup> Squadron Leader J. N. MacKENZIE, DFC; farmer; born Goodwood, Otago, 11 Aug 1914; commanded 488 and 14 (NZ) Squadrons and 64 ( **RAF**) Squadron.

<sup>11</sup> Squadron Leader T. G. LovELL-GREGG; **RAF**; born **Wanganui**, 19 Sep 1912; killed on active service, 15 Aug 1940.

<sup>12</sup> Squadron Leader D. H. WARD, DFC and bar; **RAF**; born **Whangarei**, 31 Jul 1917; killed on active service, 17 Jun 1942.

<sup>13</sup> Flight Lieutenant K. W. TAIT, DFC, m.i.d.; **RAF**; born **Wellington**, 19 Nov 1918; killed on active service, 4 Aug 1941.

<sup>14</sup> Pilot Officer W. S. WILLIAMS, m.i.d.; clerk; born Dunedin, 28 Sep 1920; killed on active service, 21 Oct 1940.

<sup>15</sup> Wing Commander R. M. TROUSDALE, DFC and bar; **RAF**; born **Auckland**, 23 Jan 1921; commanded 488 (NZ) Squadron, 1942; killed in aircraft accident, 16 Jun 1947.

<sup>16</sup> Pilot Officer W. H. HODGSON, DFC; radio technician; born Frankton

**Junction, 30 Sep 1920; killed in flying accident, 13 Mar 1941.**

**<sup>17</sup> Flying Officer B. J. G. CARBURY, DFC and bar; RAF; born Auckland.**

**<sup>18</sup> Squadron Leader K. A. LAWRENCE, DFC; RNZAF Station, Wigram; bank clerk; born Waitara, 25 Nov 1919; commanded 185 Squadron, Malta, 1942.**

**<sup>19</sup> Squadron Leader M. J. HERRICK, DFC and bar, Air Medal (US); RAF; born Hastings, 5 May 1921; killed on active service, 16 Jun 1944.**

**<sup>20</sup> Wing Commander W. G. CLOUSTON, DFC; RAF; England; born Auckland, 15 Jan 1916; commanded 258 (RAF) Squadron and 488 (NZ) Squadron, 1941-42; p.w. (Singapore) Feb 1942-Sep 1945.**

**<sup>21</sup> Flying Officer G. M. SIMPSON; RAF; born Christchurch, 22 Jun 1919; killed on active service, 26 Oct 1940.**

**<sup>22</sup> Wing Commander M. V. BLAKE, DSO, DFC; RAF; born Newman, 13 Feb 1913; commanded 234 Squadron, 1940-41; Wing Leader, Exeter and Portreath, 1941; p.w. 19 Aug 1942.**

**<sup>23</sup> Pilot Officer H. P. HILL; clerk; born Christchurch, 17 Apr 1920; killed on active service, 20 Sep 1940.**

**<sup>24</sup> Wing Commander I. S. SMITH, DFC and bar, m.i.d.; RAF; England; born Invercargill, 21 May 1917; commanded 151 Squadron, Feb 1942-Feb 1943, 487 (NZ) Squadron, Feb-Sep 1944, and 56 (RAF) Squadron, 1950—.**

**<sup>25</sup> Squadron Leader P. W. RABONE, DFC; clerk; born Salisbury, England, 2 Mar 1918; killed on active service, 24 Jul 1944.**

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

### *ACKNOWLEDGMENTS*

**THE NARRATIVE** was compiled from **Royal Air Force** and enemy documents made available by the Royal Air Force Historical Branch, **Air Ministry, London**. The photographs were supplied by the Air Ministry Information Section. The photographers' names are not known. The photograph on **page 17 (bottom)** is copyright to the Daily Mirror Newspapers Ltd.

The maps are by L. D. McCormick from material supplied by the **Air Ministry**.

**THE AUTHOR, Flight Lieutenant N. W. Faircloth**, of Dunedin, served during the war as a fighter pilot in England and **India**. He is now on the staff of the Royal New Zealand Air Force Historical Branch, **London**.

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## [BACKMATTER]

THE TYPE USED THROUGHOUT THE SERIES IS *Aldine Bembo* WHICH WAS REVIVED FOR MONOTYPE FROM A RARE BOOK PRINTED BY ALDUS IN 1495 \* THE TEXT IS SET IN 12 POINT ON A BODY OF 14 POINT

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**[covers]**

**[frontispiece]**

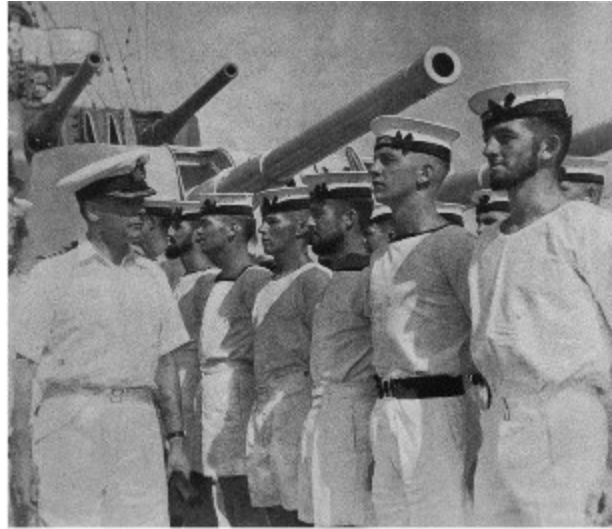
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# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## [FRONTISPIECE]



*Leander at Divisions, Alexandria, Captain R. H. Bevan inspecting*

*Leanders at Divisions, Alexandria, Captain R. H. Bevan inspecting*

COVER PHOTOGRAPH **HMS *Leander* steaming on full power trial in the Hauraki Gulf, June 1939**

**EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2**

**[TITLE PAGE]**

***LEANDER***

**S. D. WATERS**

**WAR HISTORY BRANCH**

**DEPARTMENT OF INTERNAL AFFAIRS WELLINGTON, NEW ZEALAND**

**1950**

# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

[EDITORPAGE]

**IT IS THE INTENTION** *of this series to present aspects of New Zealand's part in the Second World War which will not receive detailed treatment in the campaign volumes and which are considered either worthy of special notice or typical of many phases of our war experience. The series is illustrated with material which would otherwise seldom see publication.*

**H. K. KIPPENBERGER**

,  
**Major-General**  
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

NEW ZEALAND WAR HISTORIES

# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## FROM TROPICS TO SUB-ANTARCTIC

## *From Tropics to Sub-Antarctic*

**IN A CABLE MESSAGE** dated 8 September 1939, the Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs informed the British High Commissioner in New Zealand that ‘by placing HMS *Achilles* \* and two escort vessels [ *Leith* and *Wellington*] under the orders of Admiralty, His Majesty's Government in New Zealand have made the maximum possible strategic contribution at sea under the present circumstances, since HMS *Leander* requires to be retained on the New Zealand Station to guard against the threat of attack on shipping by armed raiders’. That was indeed a true statement of the position, but there were many young New Zealanders in HMS *Leander* at that time who thought otherwise. They had said farewell to the other ships a few days before and felt that their *Leander* had been relegated to a backwater of the war, a feeling that was intensified three months later when news was received of the part played by her sister ship at the River Plate. But they need not have worried. This was to be the greatest maritime war of all time, and the *Leander* was destined to serve in many seas during the next four years.

On 30 August 1939, barely twenty-four hours after the *Achilles* had departed for South America, the *Leander* sailed from **Auckland** for **Fanning Island**, an important mid- **Pacific** link in the submarine cable connecting New Zealand with **Canada**. The cruiser, which was wearing the broad pendant of Captain J. W. Rivett-Carnac, DSC, RN, <sup>1</sup> Commodore Commanding the New Zealand Squadron, carried New Zealand's first expeditionary force of the Second World War, a detachment of two officers and thirty other ranks, whose task was the defence of the cable station on that tiny island lying north of the Equator, more than 2800 miles from the Dominion. Almost exactly twenty-five years before—on 7 September 1914—a landing party from the German light cruiser *Nurnberg*, a unit of **Admiral Graf Spee's** Pacific Squadron, had cut the cable and wrecked the equipment of the station. Proceeding at high speed, the *Leander* called at **Suva** to refuel and arrived at **Fanning Island** on 5 September. After disembarking the troops and sixty tons of stores, the *Leander* returned via **Suva**, where she

landed two dummy coast-defence guns, and arrived at **Auckland** on 13 September.

Before the end of the month the *Leander* was in sub-Antarctic waters on a cruise to Campbell Island and the Auckland Islands, which were uninhabited and possible bases for enemy raiders. Nothing suspicious was seen in either locality, but a heavy gale with poor visibility between the rain squalls prevented a close examination of all the anchorages in the Auckland Islands. The *Leander* returned there six weeks later and anchored in Carnley Harbour, several inlets of which were visited by her boats. Port Ross and other anchorages were reconnoitred by the ship's aircraft, but again no sign of any recent human activity was seen.

There is no doubt, however, that a German ship was lying in a remote anchorage in Carnley Harbour at the time the *Leander* made her first visit to the Auckland Islands. This was the Norddeutscher Lloyd steamer *Erlangen*, 6101 tons, which had sailed from **Dunedin** on 28 August 1939, ostensibly for **Port Kembla, New South Wales**, where she was to have filled her coal bunkers for the homeward passage to **Europe**.

The *Erlangen* was ordered by radio from **Germany** not to go to **Australia**, but she had insufficient coal to enable her to reach the neutral waters of South America, 5000 miles distant. She went south to the Auckland Islands and lay concealed at the extreme head of North Arm, the innermost inlet of Carnley Harbour, for five weeks while her crew toiled at cutting rata wood, of which some 400 tons was loaded to eke out her meagre coal supply. A suit of sails was fashioned from hatch covers and spare canvas. The *Erlangen* put to sea again on 7 October and arrived in a Chilean port thirty-five days later. She subsequently made her way into the **Atlantic** where, on 24 July 1941, she was intercepted by HMS *Newcastle* and scuttled by her crew.

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\* It was not until September 1941, when the King approved the proposal that the New Zealand Naval Forces should be designated the **Royal New Zealand Navy**, that the *Leander* and *Achilles* were



**styled as HMNZ Ships.**

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# **EPIISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2**

## **LEANDER ON FOREIGN SERVICE**

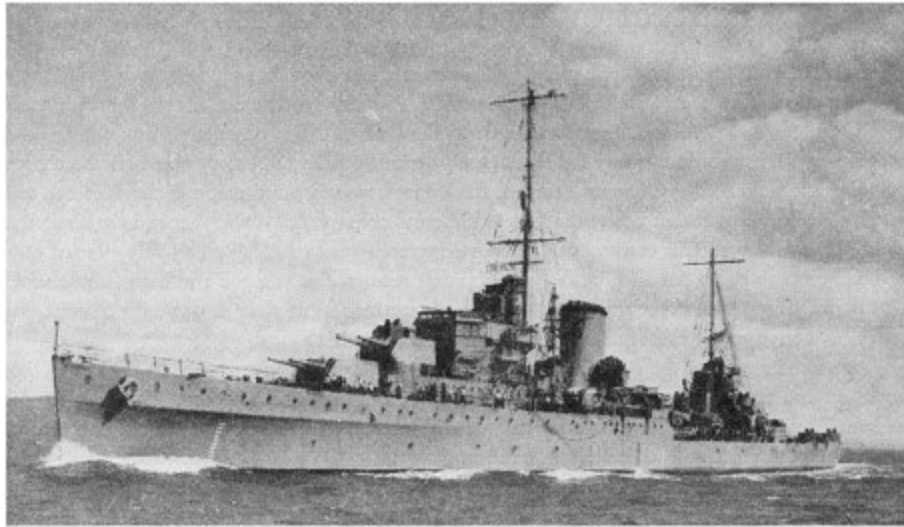
## *Leander on Foreign Service*

ON 5 JANUARY 1940, HMS *Leander*, commanded by Captain H. E. Horan, DSC, RN, <sup>2</sup> left **Lyttelton** with the troopships *Dunera* and *Sobieski* which had embarked the South Island section of the **First Echelon**, 2nd NZEF. Next morning they joined company in Cook Strait with the four transports carrying the **North Island** troops. The convoy consisted of the *Empress of Canada*, *Strathaird*, *Orion*, *Rangitata*, *Dunera*, and *Sobieski*, escorted by HMS *Ramillies*, HMAS *Canberra*, and HMS *Leander*. After an uneventful passage across the **Tasman Sea**, the New Zealand ships met the Australian transports *Empress of Japan*, *Orcades*, *Otranto*, *Orford*, and *Strathnaver*, escorted by HMAS *Australia*. The combined convoy then sailed southward and the *Leander* went into **Sydney**, whence she returned to New Zealand ten days later. The *Leander* was at the Bay of Islands on 6 February representing the **Royal New Zealand Navy** at the ceremonies celebrating the centenary of the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi.

HMS *Achilles* having returned to **Auckland** on 27 February 1940, it was arranged that the *Leander* should proceed overseas for service at the disposal of the Admiralty. In company with the Australian cruisers *Australia* and *Canberra*, she sailed from New Zealand on 2 May 1940, escorting the *Aquitania*, *Empress of Britain*, *Empress of Japan*, and *Andes*, which carried the troops of the **Second Echelon**. The convoy was joined off **Sydney** by the *Queen Mary* and *Mauritania*, and in **Bass Strait** by the *Empress of Canada* from **Melbourne**, and arrived at **Fremantle** on 10 May, the day on which **Germany** invaded the Low Countries. On 16 May, when it was halfway from **Fremantle** to Colombo, the convoy received orders to 'steer toward the Cape of Good Hope'. The *Leander* was detached and proceeded independently to Colombo and thence via **Aden** to **Alexandria**, where she arrived on 26 May.

Five days later the *Leander* was at **Port Sudan**, where she was joined by Rear Admiral A. J. L. Murray, DSO, Senior Officer, Red Sea Force, who flew his flag in her till the end of June, when his office was

established on shore at **Aden**. The Admiralty signal to commence hostilities against **Italy** was received in the early hours of 11 June. During the afternoon the Italian liner *Umbria*,



HMS LEANDER AT SEA NEAR AUCKLAND, 1939

HMS

10,076 tons, which had been brought into harbour in charge of an armed guard from HMS *Grimsby*, scuttled herself in the outer anchorage. For the remainder of the month the *Leander* patrolled in the southern area of the **Red Sea** and the approaches to **Aden**, where Italian U-boats from Massawa were cautiously active. On 27 June the *Leander* and two destroyers searched for and found the submarine *Evangelista Torricelli* \* a ground on the coast of **Eritrea**, opposite Perim, after being attacked with gunfire and depth-charges. The U-boat, which was bombed by the *Leander's* aircraft and well holed by her gunfire, was the fifth Italian submarine accounted for in the **Red Sea** area in eight days. Italian aircraft made three unsuccessful attacks on the *Leander* and her destroyers which were undamaged by near misses.

Control of the **Mediterranean** was a decisive factor in the Second World War, and Great **Britain** maintained that control by the effective use of sea power. For more than three years the main effort of British arms was exercised in the **Mediterranean** area, where sea, land, and air operations were sustained by the constant flow of ships carrying men and supplies through the narrow defile of the **Red Sea** which, from the

**Strait of Bab-el-Mandeb connecting it with the Gulf of Aden, extends for a length of some 1200 miles to the isthmus of Suez. At its southern end, the Red Sea was flanked for more than 400 miles on its western side by the hostile coastline of Italian Eritrea, about midway along which was the defended port and naval base of Massawa.**

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**\* *Evangelista Torricelli*, 880–1230 tons displacement, eight 21-inch torpedo-tubes, two 3.9-inch guns, 17 knots (surface), 8½ knots (submerged); sister ship to *Galileo Galilei*, captured near Aden on 18 June 1940. Evangelista Torricelli, Italian mathematician and philosopher (1608–47), was disciple of Galileo and inventor of the mercury barometer.**

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# **EPIISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2**

## **PROTECTION OF RED SEA CONVOYS**

## *Protection of Red Sea Convoys*

**THE PROTECTION** of shipping along this ancient seaway was the monotonous but important duty assigned to the New Zealand cruiser which, for nearly six months, was the senior ship of the **Red Sea** force. In the eastern approach to the Gulf of **Aden** on 2 July 1940, the *Leander*, in company with two sloops, met the first convoy from **Bombay**, BN 1, of nine merchant ships, including six tankers. Northbound for **Suez**, this convoy was escorted through the **Red Sea** to a position beyond **Port Sudan** where the first southbound convoy, BS 1, was met and the respective escorts changed over. This convoy was dispersed 200 miles east of **Aden** on 15 July. Varied only by brief visits to **Aden** for fuel, stores, and running repairs, this was the routine of the *Leander* for a period of nearly five months, during which she steamed more than 30,000 miles in company with slow convoys and averaged only five days a month in harbour

The southern part of the **Red Sea** and its shores are one of the hottest areas in the world. For weeks on end the shade temperatures recorded in the *Leander's* deck log ranged from 85 to 92 degrees. The continuous discomfort due to heat and humidity was aggravated from time to time by fierce sandstorms at sea as well as in harbour.

The feeble activities of the Italian submarines were checked by the destruction of five and the capture of a sixth during the latter part of June. Thereafter they gave little trouble, and their only success against the ships escorted by the *Leander* was the sinking, on 6 September, of a thirty-year-old Greek tanker which had straggled far behind Convoy BN 4. Italian aircraft were equally unenterprising. They made infrequent hit-and-run raids on **Aden** and a number of convoys. No ship was hit, but one vessel in Convoy BN 5 was damaged by a near miss on 20 September and towed to **Aden**.

A welcome break in the monotony came in the early hours of 21 October when Convoy BN 7 was passing east of the approaches to Massawa. HMS *Auckland* sighted and engaged two Italian destroyers,

HMAS *Yarra* joining in shortly before the enemy turned away and firing ceased. Two torpedoes failed to hit the Australian ship. The *Leander*, rapidly working up to full power, steamed to intercept the enemy and opened fire, first on one and then on the other, before they disappeared into the early morning haze. She then returned to the convoy. An hour later the destroyer *Kimberley* reported that she was proceeding to intercept the enemy off Harmil Island at daybreak. At 5.50 a.m. the *Kimberley* sighted one destroyer in that locality. She opened fire on the enemy, who replied, and a few minutes later a shore battery joined in the action. Nevertheless, the *Kimberley* closed to 5000 yards, and at 6.25 a.m. the enemy destroyer, identified by her number as the *Francesco Nullo*, \* was stopped, on fire and listing heavily. The Italians abandoned their ship, which was sunk by two torpedoes. The *Kimberley* then engaged the shore battery until she received a hit in the engine-room. Two enemy guns were silenced. The *Leander* left the convoy and steamed at high speed to the assistance of the *Kimberley*, whom she took in tow outside the reefs at ten o'clock. A few minutes later enemy aircraft attacked, dropping fifteen bombs which burst in a line about 200 yards ahead of the *Leander*, and two others which failed to explode. The cruiser and her tow took station astern of the convoy at 12.45 p.m. As they passed the French motor-vessel *Felix Roussel*, the *Leander* and *Kimberley* were cheered loudly by some 600 New Zealand troops of the **Third Echelon** who were on passage in that ship from **Bombay** to Egypt.

The *Leander* was relieved by HMAS *Hobart* on 26 November 1940. In less than five months she had steamed 30,874 miles and escorted eighteen convoys totalling 396 ships of some 2,500,000 tons, mostly British, but including Norwegian, Dutch, Swedish, Greek, Yugoslav, Egyptian, and Panamanian vessels. The convoys comprised numerous troop transports and supply ships, as well as many oil tankers, and accounted for about one-third of the troops and supplies carried through the **Red Sea** during the period. Captain R. H. Bevan, RN, <sup>3</sup> relieved Captain H. E. Horan in command of the *Leander* at **Aden** on 27 November 1940.



By this time the British blockade was largely effective in preventing supplies reaching the enemy in Italian Somaliland and **Eritrea**. When it was learned that a factory at **Banda Alula** had completed the manufacture of 1000 cases of canned fish for consumption in Italian Somaliland, the *Leander* was ordered to carry out what was designated operation 'Canned'. The object was to demolish the factory and the wireless station at **Banda Alula**, which lies about thirty-two miles west of **Cape Guardafui**, at the tip of the Horn of **Africa**. When the *Leander* arrived off the place on the morning of 28 November, her aircraft bombed the wireless station, and after warning to evacuate the canning factory had been given, the cruiser shelled it at a mean range of 4000 yards, ninety-eight rounds from her 6-inch guns causing considerable damage and setting fire to the buildings. Having recovered her aircraft after it had made a second attack on the wireless station, the *Leander* proceeded to **Bombay**, where she arrived on 2 December.

An enjoyable spell of twenty-five days in that port while the ship was refitting was the first real diversion for her crew since she left New Zealand seven months before. The *Leander* sailed from **Bombay** on 27 December, escorting a convoy which numbered twenty-nine ships when it entered the **Red Sea**. She returned with a southbound convoy to **Aden** and arrived at Colombo on 21 January 1941.

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\* *Francesco Nullo*, 1058 tons displacement (standard), 35 knots, four 4.7-inch guns, four 21-inch torpedo-tubes.

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# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## HUNTING ENEMY RAIDERS

## *Hunting Enemy Raiders*

**AT THIS TIME** considerable anxiety was expressed by the **New Zealand Government** concerning the protection of shipping on the New Zealand Station, where two German raiders had been cruising for some months, and a request was made for the return of the *Leander*. In response to the urgent personal representations of the First Lord of the Admiralty, however, it was agreed that the New Zealand cruiser should remain on the East Indies Station. Actually, though it could not be known at that time, the immediate danger in New Zealand waters was past, both German raiders being on their way to the **Indian Ocean**, where several others were also operating. During the last week of January 1941, the *Leander* took part, with three other cruisers, in an unsuccessful hunt for a raider in the wide area between the Maldive Islands and the Seychelles. She was to have better luck a month later.



MAP OF NORTH-WEST INDIAN OCEAN

After escorting the *Aquitania*, *Mauretania*, and *Nieuw Amsterdam*—the last-mentioned was carrying the 4th Reinforcements, 2nd NZEF—from Colombo to **Bombay**, the *Leander* sailed to patrol an area west of the Maldive Islands. In the forenoon of 27 February a ship was sighted steaming fast on an easterly course. She was overtaken and challenged, but her replies to signals were dilatory and evasive and she kept her

course and speed. When ordered to stop she hoisted the Italian ensign and opened fire at 3000 yards. A few shell splinters hit the *Leander*, who fired five salvos in one minute. It was then seen that the Italians were abandoning ship and that their flag had been struck. Their ship had been hit many times, and through a large hole in her side it could be seen that she was burning. The fire spread rapidly, and after a great internal explosion the ship sank under a vast cloud of black smoke. The *Leander* picked up the captain, ten officers, and ninety-two men, one of whom was seriously wounded. He died during the afternoon and was buried with full naval honours. From the prisoners it was learned that the ship was the fast motor-vessel *Ramb I*, \* which had been fitted out at Massawa with four 4.7-inch guns and eight anti-aircraft machine guns. She had sailed from Massawa on 20 February, under orders to raid merchant shipping during her passage towards the Dutch East Indies. The *Leander* transferred her prisoners at Addu Atoll to the Admiralty tanker *Pearleaf*, which took them to Colombo.

Wireless direction-finding bearings indicated that enemy ships were in the vicinity of Saya de Malha, a vast coralline bank lying some hundreds of miles south-east of the Seychelles Islands. This area was, in fact, much frequented at that time by German raiders and their supply ships. On 2 March the *Leander* met the Australian cruiser *Canberra* at sea and, in accordance with the orders of the Commander-in-Chief, East Indies, they searched the area. In the afternoon of 4 March 1941, the *Canberra*'s aircraft sighted a cargo ship in company with a loaded tanker. Suspecting the former of being a raider, the *Canberra* opened fire on her at 18,000 yards. She did not reply; subsequently she proved to be the German motor-vessel *Coburg*, 7400 tons, which had left Massawa about 21 February. She was soon burning fiercely and sank not long afterwards. The tanker was the Norwegian *Ketty Brovig*, 7030 tons, which had been captured on 2 February by the German raider *Atlantis*. When threatened by near-miss bombs dropped by the *Canberra*'s aircraft, the *Ketty Brovig* was scuttled by her prize crew. The *Leander* arrived on scene at sunset and assisted the *Canberra* to pick up eighteen German officers and forty-seven seamen and five Norwegian officers and

thirty-three Chinese, the latter from the tanker, all being landed at **Mauritius** four days later. The destruction of the *Ketty Brovig*, which was not known to the Germans for nearly two months, caused a considerable derangement of their plans for refuelling the several raiders in the Indian Ocean.

From 10 to 20 March the *Leander*, **Canberra**, and armed merchant cruiser *City of Durban* carried out an unsuccessful search for an enemy supply ship and a submarine from Massawa which were thought to be making for a rendezvous 400 miles south-east of Madagascar. On 23 March the *Leander*, patrolling between **Mauritius** and Madagascar, intercepted the Vichy-French motor-vessel *Charles L.D.*, \*\* 5267 tons, which was sent into **Mauritius** in charge of an armed guard. Less than three weeks later the New Zealand cruiser was on her way from Madras to **Singapore**, escorting a convoy of four troopships, when she was relieved by HMS *Ceres* and ordered to Colombo to prepare for a mission to the Persian Gulf.

A situation which for a time appeared very threatening to British interests had developed after the Government of **Iraq** was overthrown on 3 April 1941 by Rashid Ali, with the connivance of

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\* *Ramb I*, 3667 tons gross register, 17 knots. One of four sister ships built for the Italian Ministry for **Africa** (*Regia Azienda Monopole Banane*) and employed in the banana trade to **Italy**.

\*\* Owned by Louis Dreyfus and Company, **Paris**.

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German agents. The British Government accepted an offer of Indian troops from **Karachi**, but it was laid down that force was to be used only if the landing of the troops at **Basra** was opposed. The Commander-in-Chief, East Indies, Vice-Admiral R. Leatham, CB, embarked in the *Leander*, which sailed from Colombo on 14 April and arrived off the mouth of the Shatt-el-Arab on the 18th, a few hours after the troopships

from **India**. The landing was unopposed and the official attitude friendly for the time being. Admiral Leatham returned to Colombo in the *Leander* on 29 April and the ship went to sea again the same day to take part in a search for the German raider *Pinguin*. \* She was back at Colombo three days later and sailed on 6 May, escorting the *Aquitania* and *Mauretania*, carrying the 5th Reinforcements, 2nd NZEF, and the *Ile de France*, bound for **Suez**. Three hours after clearing Nine Degree Channel between the Laccadive Islands and Maldiva Islands on 7 May, the *Leander* turned the convoy over to the *Canberra* and steamed at speed to the westward. The hunt for the elusive raider was on again. Early that morning and more than 1000 miles to the westward, the *Pinguin* had sunk a British tanker. HMS *Cornwall* was barely half that distance south of the position given in the tanker's distress signal. Her aircraft sighted the *Pinguin* next morning and she intercepted and sank the raider during the afternoon.

On 23 May 1941 the Prime Minister of New Zealand, the Rt. Hon. P. Fraser, who was then in **Cairo**, reported in a cable message to **Wellington** that at the special request of the First Lord of the Admiralty he had agreed to the *Leander* being sent to the **Mediterranean**, where matters were going badly and where the 'help of *Leander* type of cruiser is essential to support our men in **Crete**....' But when the *Leander* arrived at **Aden** from Colombo on 29 May, she was already too late to 'support our men in **Crete**', who were then being evacuated by the **Royal Navy**. Nevertheless, when she arrived at **Alexandria** on 5 June, she was a welcome addition to the sadly depleted **Mediterranean Fleet**, and Admiral Cunningham informed the New Zealand Naval Board that he was 'very glad to have her'.

Early in May, concurrently with the arrival in **Syria** of a German economic mission and other signs of enemy penetration, German aircraft began to make use of the Syrian and **Iraq** airfields. The situation had serious possibilities if the Germans should obtain complete control of **Syria**. To prevent this it was necessary to occupy the country, which was invaded on 8 June by British and Free French troops. During the

next four weeks the *Leander* took an active part in naval operations in support of the army, bombarding enemy positions and engaging Vichy French destroyers. Hostilities ceased at midnight of 11–12 July and the armistice agreement was signed at **Acre** two days later. After taking part in the transport of British troops from **Port Said** to **Cyprus**, the *Leander* received orders to return to New Zealand. She sailed on 31 July and ended an eventful cruise of sixteen months by escorting the *Aquitania* across the **Tasman Sea**, arriving at **Wellington** on 8 September 1941. During that period she had steamed more than 100,000 miles, mostly in tropical waters and with only two brief spells in dry dock for cleaning, painting, and minor repairs.

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\* *Penguin*, formerly Hansa liner *Kandelfels*, 7766 tons gross register. During her cruise of eleven months, this raider captured or sank twenty-eight ships totalling 139,120 tons and laid mines in Australian waters causing the loss of three ships of 17,790 tons.

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# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## ESCORTING SOUTH PACIFIC CONVOYS



## *Escorting South Pacific Convoys*

**FOR FOUR DAYS** following the treacherous attack on **Pearl Harbour**, which signalled **Japan's** entry into the war, HMNZS *Leander* was patrolling north of New Zealand. During the second half of December 1941, and most of January 1942, she was escorting ships carrying reinforcements and equipment for the New Zealand troops in **Fiji**.

At the beginning of February 1942 an Anzac Area was defined in the South Pacific and an **Anzac Naval Force** established under the command of Vice-Admiral H. F. Leary, **United States Navy**. The Anzac Squadron, then comprising HMAS *Australia* (flagship of Rear-Admiral J. G. Crace, RN), USS *Chicago*, HMNZS *Achilles*, HMNZS *Leander*, and the **United States** destroyers *Perkins* and *Lamson*, assembled at **Suva** on 12 February and subsequently operated in the area between **Fiji** and **New Caledonia**, in co-operation with one or more United States Task Forces.

The American effort in the **Pacific** was directed in the first place to countering the Japanese menace to New Zealand and **Australia** and securing the long lines of communication between the **United States** and the South Pacific. The Fiji Islands, **Efate** and **Espiritu Santo** in the New Hebrides, and **Noumea** in **New Caledonia** were selected as advanced bases. Energetic measures were taken to develop these and minor island bases for naval and air operations, as fuel and troop staging stations, and as distribution points for supplies and material. 'The establishment of those bases was in large measure responsible for our ability to stand off the Japanese in their advance towards New Zealand and **Australia**. Without them we should have been at such a disadvantage that it is doubtful if the enemy could have been checked....' \*

The Anzac Squadron covered the passage of numerous convoys transporting troops and material from the **United States** to the South Pacific, the *Leander*, *Achilles*, and other ships being detached for close-escort duty as requisite. During the first three months of the war in the **Pacific**, the *Leander* was at sea for seventy-two days and steamed 23,220 miles. Towards the end of April 1942, new areas known as the

**South Pacific Area** and the **South-West Pacific Area** were constituted, and the title of **Anzac Area** lapsed. Subsequently, the **New Zealand** cruisers passed to the operational control of the **United States** Commander, **South Pacific Area**.

The *Leander* and *Achilles* and three **United States** destroyers, operating as **Task Group 12.2**, arrived at **Vila, New Hebrides**, on 4 May 1942, with a convoy of five ships carrying **American** troops and the material and supplies for the establishment of a forward base. While the ships were discharging and airfields being constructed, the **New Zealand** cruisers maintained a constant patrol north and west of the **New Hebrides**. On the day of their arrival at **Vila**, **American** carrier-borne aircraft attacked **Japanese** shipping carrying out landing operations at **Tulagi** in the southern **Solomon Islands**. On 7–8 May was fought the **Battle of the Coral Sea**, the first naval action in which the issue was decided solely by carrier-based aircraft. Both sides lost an aircraft-carrier, but the **Japanese** accepted defeat and abandoned their great combined operation against **Port Moresby**. A month later the enemy suffered another major defeat in the **Battle of Midway**, in which he lost four aircraft-carriers.

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\* **Admiral E. J. King**, **Commander-in-Chief, United States Navy**, *Our Navy at War*.

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On 28 May the *Leander* landed **American** troops and supplies on **Espiritu Santo**. From the middle of June to 13 August she was engaged in escorting ships carrying the **37th Division, United States Army**, from **Auckland** to **Fiji**, where they relieved the **New Zealand** troops.

The surprise assault landing of the **United States Marines** on **Guadalcanal** and at **Tulagi**, in the **Solomon Islands**, on 8 August 1942, opened a bitterly-fought campaign, the issue of which was vital to the security of **New Zealand** and **Australia** and of prime importance in the **Pacific War**. This campaign for possession of an air base on a remote and savage island at the apex of an inverted triangle, 3000 miles from **Japan**

and 6000 miles from the **United States**, was a dour bout in the struggle between two great naval powers for sea and air supremacy in the **Pacific**. Six notable naval actions were fought and four major attempts made by the enemy to recapture the **Guadalcanal** airfield, while minor operations to reinforce and supply the troops on shore were carried out continuously by the Americans and the Japanese. In desperate fighting at sea, in the air, and on land, very heavy losses were suffered by both sides. At one time the Japanese came within an ace of success.

Neither the *Leander* nor the *Achilles* took part in any of the naval actions about **Guadalcanal**, but both were actively employed in supply operations during the six months' campaign. Acting independently or as units of United States Task Forces, they covered the movements of a number of important convoys. On 14 September 1942, the *Leander*, in company with the **United States** cruisers *Minneapolis* and *Boise* and several destroyers, sailed from **Espiritu Santo** and next day met a convoy of six transports carrying 5000 United States Marines and their equipment and supplies for **Guadalcanal**. During the afternoon a Task Force covering this operation was attacked by Japanese submarines, which torpedoed and sank the aircraft-carrier *Wasp* and a destroyer and damaged the battleship *North Carolina*. Despite the threat of a considerable Japanese force a day's steam to the north-west, the convoy and its escorts carried on to **Guadalcanal**, where the sorely-needed reinforcements and supplies were landed on 18 September.

After a further period of escort duty, the *Leander* went to **Auckland** in November for an extensive refit which lasted three months. By the time she returned to active service in March 1943, under the command of Captain C. A. L. Mansergh, DSC, RN, <sup>4</sup> formerly of the *Achilles*, the **Guadalcanal** campaign had ended and the Americans had carried their operations forward into the New Georgia Group in the central **Solomons**. Their major objective there was the capture of **Munda** airfield, and to that end landings were made on **New Georgia** during the last days of June.

After a visit to **Pearl Harbour** in May and the escorting of more convoys, HMNZS *Leander* joined United States Task Group 36.1 off Savo Island on 11 July, taking the place of the light cruiser *Helena*, which had been sunk in action against Japanese destroyers in Kula Gulf on 6 July. The Task Group, which consisted of the cruisers *Honolulu* (flagship of Rear-Admiral W. L. Ainsworth, USN), *St. Louis*, and *Leander* and the destroyers *Nicholas*, *Radford*, and *O'Bannon*, \* operated off the entrance to Kula Gulf during the night of 11 July as a covering force for a number of transports which unloaded reinforcements and supplies for the American troops at Rice Anchorage.

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\* *Honolulu* and *St. Louis*, light cruisers, 9700 tons displacement, 100,000 horse-power (32.5 knots), fifteen 6-inch guns, eight 5-inch anti-aircraft guns. *Nicholas*, *Radford*, *O'Bannon*, destroyers, 2050 tons, 37 knots, five 5-inch guns, ten torpedo-tubes.

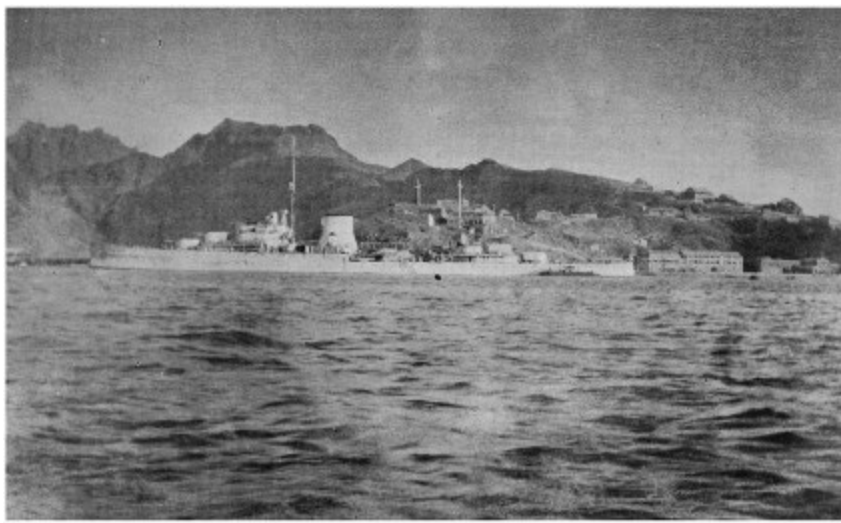
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### From the SUB-ANTARCTIC to the GULF OF ADEN



THE NORTH ARM OF CARNLEY HARBOUR from Musgrave Peninsula. In one of these inlets of the Auckland Islands the German ship *Erlangen* is said to have hidden in September 1939 while the *Leander* was visiting the group.

**THE NORTH ARM OF CARNLEY HARBOUR from Musgrave Peninsula. In one of these inlets of the Auckland Islands the German ship *Erlangen* is said to have hidden in September 1939 while the *Leander* was visiting the group**



THE LEANDER AT ADEN IN 1940

### **THE LEANDER AT ADEN IN 1940**



ACTION IN THE INDIAN OCEAN  
The Italian merchant raider *Ramb I* on fire  
after being hit by the *Leander*

### **ACTION IN THE INDIAN OCEAN**

**The Italian merchant raider *Ramb I* on fire after being hit by the *Leander***



The end of *Ramb I*

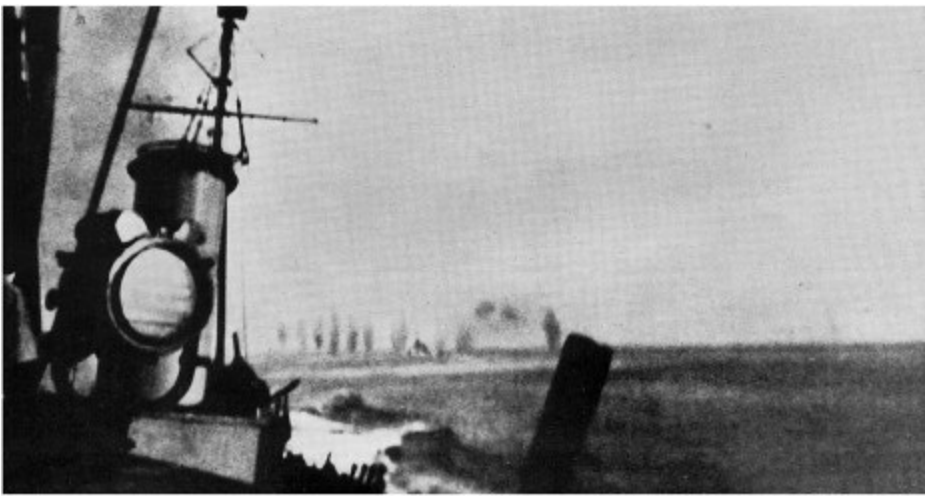
**The end of *Ramb I***



DECK SPORTS IN THE INDIAN OCEAN A tug of war

**DECK SPORTS IN THE INDIAN OCEAN A tug of war**





ACTION IN THE MEDITERRANEAN  
The *Leander* bombed off Syria, as seen from HMS *Phoebe*

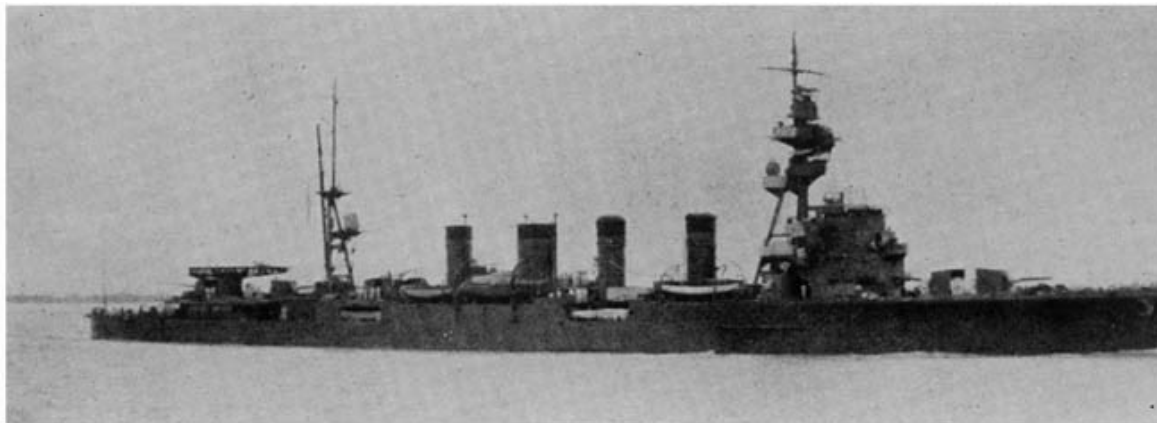
**ACTION IN THE MEDITERRANEAN**  
The *Leander* bombed off **Syria**, as seen from HMS *Phoebe*



TORPEDO MAINTENANCE IN THE LEANDER

**TORPEDO MAINTENANCE IN THE LEANDER**

ese light cruiser *Jintsu*

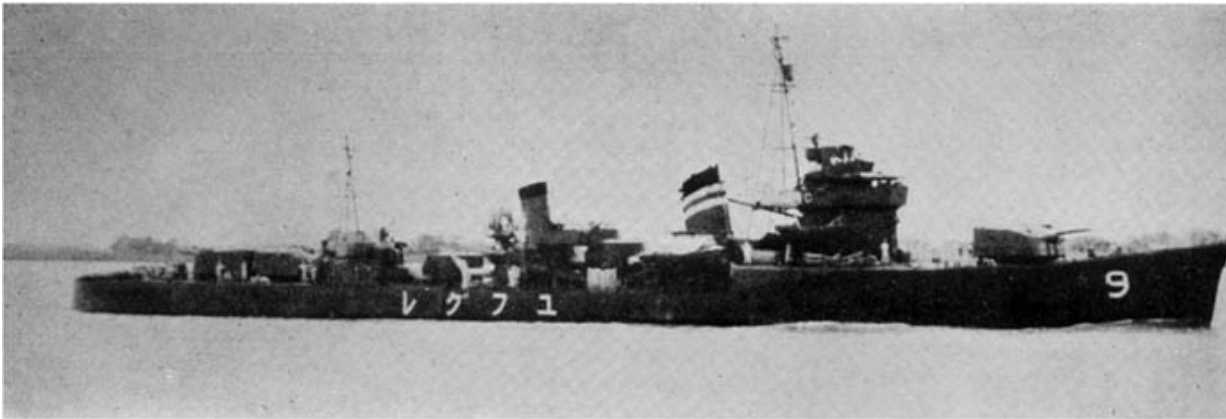


[ gap — reason: unclear] light cruiser *Jintsu*



GUNCREWS AFTER THE ACTION OFF KOLOMBANGARA

## GUNCREWS AFTER THE ACTION OFF KOLOMBANGARA



The Japanese des  
*Yugure*

## The Japanese destroyer *Yugure*



After Kolombangara,  
Cement was mixed  
for temporary repairs  
to the *Leander*. This  
photograph was taken  
near Tulagi Beach.

After Kolombangara. Cement was mixed for temporary repairs to the *Leander*. This photograph was taken near Tulagi Beach





BURIAL AT SEA AFTER ACTION

**BURIAL AT SEA AFTER ACTION**

**IN DOCK at Auckland**



DAMAGE TO A BOILER CAUSED BY A JAPANESE TORPEDO

**DAMAGE TO A BOILER CAUSED BY A JAPANESE TORPEDO**



**DAMAGE TO THE SIDE OF THE LEANDER**

**EPIISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2**

**NIGHT ACTION OFF KOLOMBANGARA**

## *Night Action off Kolombangara*

**THE TASK GROUP** returned to **Tulagi** for fuel during the forenoon of Monday, 12 July, and sailed at 5 p.m. for the Kula Gulf area, having been reinforced by six destroyers— *Taylor, Buchanan, Woodworth, Maury, Gwin, and Ralph Talbot*. \* These ships were from three different flotillas, had not worked together with the cruisers, and had not functioned at any time as a single tactical unit under the group commander. The high command ‘fully appreciated the situation, but felt that the advantages to be gained justified the risks involved’.

After leaving **Tulagi** the Task Group steamed fast on a north-westerly course close along the coast of **Santa Isabel Island** to avoid being silhouetted against the bright moon, which was about three-quarters full and not due to set until 2.15 a.m. By midnight, course had been altered to approximately due west and the ships were heading towards Visuvisu Point, the northernmost tip of **New Georgia**. About half an hour later the first enemy report was received from a patrolling Catalina, which had sighted six ships steaming about south-east by east at 25 knots. Thereafter, various signals were received amplifying the information and reporting the enemy force as one light cruiser and five destroyers. The Task Group, steaming west at 28 knots, assumed a line ahead battle formation. The five van destroyers were about three miles ahead, and the rear destroyers about the same distance astern of the flagship, but some of the latter were not properly in station when the action started. The cruisers were about 1000 yards apart, the *Honolulu* (flagship) leading the *Leander* and *St. Louis* in that order. The sea was calm and the sky clear, except to the westward where the moon was setting behind a bank of clouds.

According to a captured Japanese document, the enemy force consisted of the light cruiser *Jintsu* (flagship of an unnamed rear-admiral) and the destroyers *Yukikaze, Hamakaze, Mikatsuki, Kiyonami, and Yugure*. \*\* They were operating as a supporting force for a transport group consisting of the destroyers *Satsuki, Minatsuki,*

*Matsukaze*, and *Yunagi*. The latter ships, which were running troops and supplies to Japanese positions at the head of Kula Gulf and which kept well over toward the steep coastline of **Kolombangara**, were not sighted at any time.

It was a minute before one o'clock when the enemy ships began to appear on the American radar screens. Four minutes later the van destroyers reported the enemy in sight at a distance of 16,500 yards. Steaming on almost reciprocal courses, the two forces were closing each other at the rate of a mile a minute. At 1.9 a.m. Admiral Ainsworth ordered his destroyers to attack with torpedoes, and there began another swift, fierce night action of the pattern common to the Solomon Islands campaign. During the next ten minutes the leading destroyers discharged twenty-six torpedoes and those in the rear, though badly bunched, got off twenty-five. The *Leander* fired four from her starboard tubes, but these probably all passed south of the enemy.

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\* *Taylor*, destroyer, 2050 tons, 37 knots, five 5-inch guns, ten torpedo-tubes. *Gwin*, 1630 tons, 36.5 knots, five 5-inch guns, ten torpedo-tubes. *Buchanan* and *Woodworth*, 1630 tons, 36.5 knots, four 5-inch guns, five torpedo-tubes. *Maury* and *Ralph Talbot*, 1500 tons, 36.5 knots, four 5-inch guns, eight torpedo-tubes.

\*\* *Jintsu*, 5900 tons, six 5.5-inch guns, eight 21-inch torpedo-tubes, 33 knots. *Yukikaze*, *Hamakaze*, and *Kiyonami*, 2000 tons, six 5-inch guns, eight 24-inch torpedo-tubes, 34 ½ knots. *Yugure*, 1600 tons, five 5-inch guns, eight 24-inch torpedo-tubes, 34 knots. *Mikatsuki*, four 4.7-inch guns, six 24-inch torpedo-tubes, 34 knots.

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The first torpedoes had barely started to run when the *Jintsu*, second ship in the enemy line, exposed a searchlight on the leading American destroyers, opened fire, and discharged torpedoes. Almost instantly she became a target for the rapid gunfire of the *Honolulu*, *Leander*, and *St. Louis*, the New Zealand cruiser opening at a range of

11,000 yards. The *Jintsu's* searchlight was extinguished almost at once, and thereafter the cruisers used radar ranges and the indications of hits on the enemy's ships and his gun flashes as points of aim. By this time it was intensely dark, the moon being completely hidden behind dense rain clouds. The Japanese account of the action says that the *Jintsu* was 'exposed to a concentrated fire, so, together with the *Mikatsuki*, she ducked into a squall and disappeared to the eastward'. The *Jintsu* took no further part in the action and must have sunk soon afterwards. According to two survivors who were picked up by an American destroyer three days later, there was a heavy explosion in the forepart of the cruiser, which they thought was caused by a torpedo-hit. Another Japanese account of the action says that the *Jintsu* 'achieved a heroic end, with the admiral, his staff, the commanding officer, and all but a very few witnesses heroically killed'.

Immediately after the *Jintsu* had opened fire, the destroyers *Yukikaze*, *Hamakaze*, *Kiyonami*, and *Yugure* followed suit and, at a mean range of 6500 yards, discharged twenty-nine torpedoes, all of which were of the 24-inch type, with warheads of 1200 lb. These were well on their way when Rear-Admiral Ainsworth passed a signal to his ships by TBS radio \* to make a turn of 180 degrees to port together, but as a result of defects in the system, the 'executive' order was not received in the *Leander* and was missed by all the rear destroyers except the *Ralph Talbot*. All the ships were firing hard and the situation was complicated by the dense smoke from the guns. It was seen through a gap in the smoke that the *Honolulu* had started to turn to port, and as the initial formation was 'port quarter line', drastic action had to be taken by the *Leander* to avoid collision, and she checked fire after getting off twenty-one broadsides. The *Ralph Talbot* was 'forced to put her engines full astern, manoeuvre radically, and use whistle signals to avoid the other four destroyers which were standing on at thirty knots'.

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\* Inter-ship voice radio communication.

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# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## LEANDER TORPEDOED

## *Leander Torpedoed*

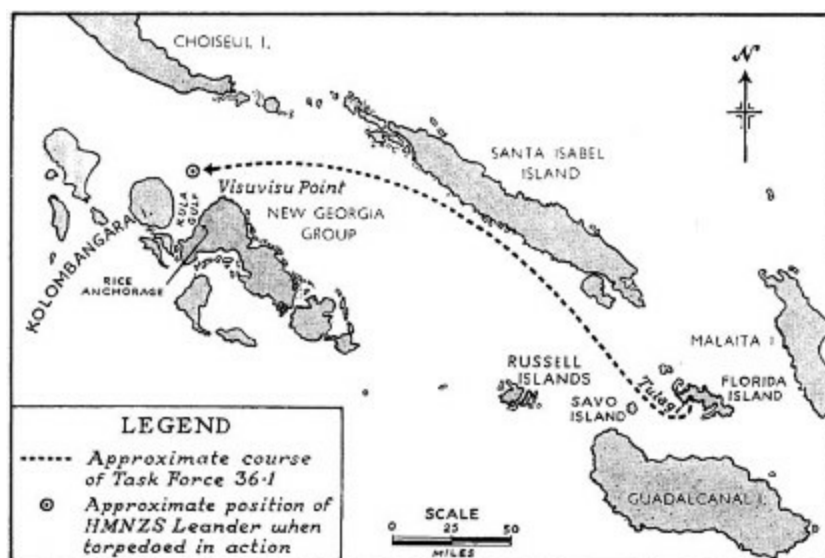
**THE CRUISERS** were badly bunched at the turn, and almost as soon as the *Leander* had straightened up to follow the *St. Louis* on the new course, she was shaken severely by the violent explosion of a torpedo which hit her on the port side amidships. The engines were at once ordered to be stopped and the *Leander* was quickly left behind by the *Honolulu* and *St. Louis*, who resumed firing and continued the action to the north-westward. The destroyers on the starboard quarter of the cruisers had 'manoeuvred violently' to avoid other enemy torpedoes as they crossed the American line.

At the time the Task Group was about to make its 180 degree turn, the patrolling Catalina reported that four enemy destroyers had also made a radical alteration of course to port and were retiring to the northward. The commander of the leading American destroyers was ordered to pursue them. As a matter of fact, the latter had been scattered during the turning manoeuvre and, 'acting more or less independently, they were unable to concentrate and co-ordinate their movements because of the darkness and the confused picture on the radar screen'. The Japanese account of the action says that their destroyers 'withdrew for a while' to the north-westward and, after reloading their torpedo-tubes, they 'reversed course and proceeded to the scene of the action'.

The *Honolulu* and *St. Louis* had ceased firing about ten minutes after the *Leander* was hit and stood away to the northward. At 1.55 a.m. the *Honolulu* made radar contact with a group of ships sharp on the port bow at a distance of about ten miles. They were the Japanese destroyers returning to attack, but in the American flagship there was grave uncertainty whether they were 'four of the enemy's vessels retiring or our own van destroyers in pursuit of the enemy after finishing off the cripples'. The position was confused further by a breakdown of the forward TBS radio in the *Honolulu*. The after radar plot reported that the ships were Japanese, but 'in such a way that the various stations which



received the report did not realise that Radar Aft was positive of their identity .... It was now apparent that whatever the mysterious ships were, they were closing rapidly toward our line.'



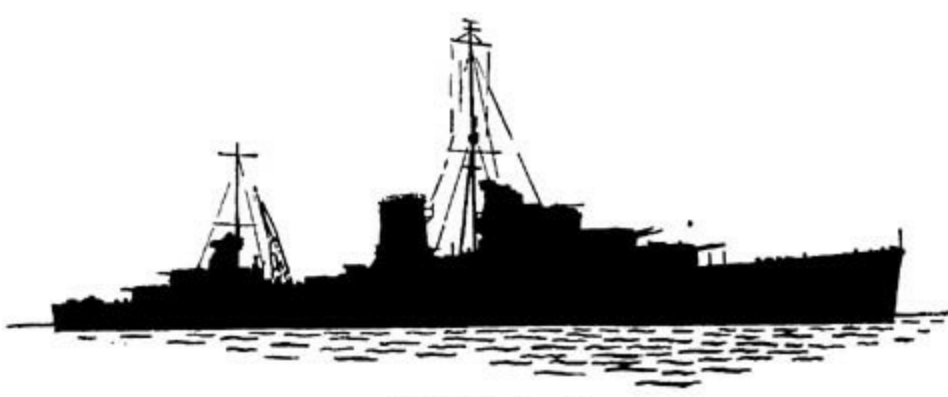
At 2.5 a.m. the *Honolulu* fired star shells and a minute later gave the order to commence firing. But before either cruiser could open fire, the tracks of torpedoes were seen approaching. Three torpedoes passed close ahead of the *Honolulu*. One passed under her stem and two cleared her stern by barely 100 yards. The *St. Louis* was hit on the port bow and forced to slow to eight knots. About two minutes later, the *Honolulu*, which had made a sharp alteration of course, was struck by a torpedo on the starboard bow. The destroyer *Gwin* was also torpedoed and set on fire. Her rudder was jammed by the explosion and the *Honolulu* barely escaped a collision by making a drastic turn to starboard. Then the *Honolulu* was hit on the stern by yet another torpedo which, luckily, failed to explode. This successful attack was made by the Japanese destroyers *Yukikaze*, *Hamakaze*, *Kiyonami*, and *Yugure*, who discharged twenty-six torpedoes. They then withdrew to the north-westward and, 'not being able to locate the *Jintsu*, returned to base at the Shortland Islands'.

The *Honolulu* and *St. Louis* made a quick survey of their damage and reported that they could steam at 15 knots. The scattered destroyers were assembled to screen the cruisers. While preparations were being made to take the disabled *Gwin* in tow, the destroyer *Buchanan* collided

with the *Woodworth*, damaging one of the latter's propellers and flooding three compartments aft. The *Buchanan* was severely shaken by the explosion of one of several depth-charges which were knocked overboard from the *Woodworth*.

Between four and five hours later, enemy aircraft made three attempts to attack the returning Task Group but were driven off by the ships' gunfire and fighters from the **Russell Islands**. At nine o'clock the *Gwin* began to settle and it was apparent that she could not be saved. Ten officers and forty-four ratings, who were all that survived of her ship's company, were taken off and she was sunk by torpedoes. She had lost sixty-seven officers and men in the action. The damaged cruisers and their screening destroyers arrived at **Tulagi** during the afternoon.

The torpedo that struck the *Leander* blew a huge, jagged hole in her port side amidships and exploded into No. 1 boiler-room, which was badly wrecked by the blast. All those on duty there were killed. The hole was about twenty feet in depth from the lower deck level and thirty feet in length, with distortion of armour and shell plating and frames extending more than fifty feet fore and aft. There were bad cracks in the ship's side and in the lower deck, which was lifted between three and four feet over the main damage area. The explosion threw up a great column of water, most of which fell on the after part of the ship and swept several men overboard. Blast from the explosion vented up a boiler-room fan casing and blew seven members of a 4-inch gun's crew over the side. Unfortunately, the *Leander*, which was steaming at high speed when hit, had travelled a considerable distance before it was known that the men had gone. The port quadruple torpedo-tube mounting, situated about fifty feet abaft the seat of the explosion, was lifted bodily aft for several feet, leaving the torpedoes lolling over the ship's side.



HMNZS *Leander*  
**HMNZS *Leander***

# EPIISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

‘QUI PATITUR VINCIT’

## *'Qui Patitur Vincit'*

**THE *LEANDER* took an immediate list of ten degrees to port. Main steam failed to the two after engines (inner shafts) and electric power was cut off everywhere forward of No. 3 boiler-room, plunging the ship into complete darkness and bringing all auxiliary machinery to a dead stop. Very soon, steam was lost on the port forward engine, due to the enforced evacuation of No. 2 boiler-room because of the intense heat when the air supply fans were disabled by blast. The ship had lost two-thirds of her 72,000 horse-power steaming capacity. The wrecking of the electrical installation caused a complete cut-out of all communications, except the very limited number of sound-powered telephones, and a total failure of all gunnery fire control and radio equipment. The telephone battery was put out of action by a short circuit on its leads. Not only had electric power failed, but the transmitting station, with its superhuman calculating machines which correlated a dozen different sets of data at once for the control and accurate firing of the guns, had been completely flooded and its operators compelled to leave the compartment. The *Leander* was in no condition to renew the action had the enemy returned, and when daylight came there was every likelihood of air attacks.**

**But the *Royal Navy* 'can find precedent or parallel for any situation that the force of the weather or the malice of the King's enemies may bring about'. Almost exactly 145 years before —on 1 August 1798 — HMS *Leander*, a fourth rate of fifty guns, commanded by Captain T. B. Thompson, had fought gallantly in the Battle of the *Nile*, and a fortnight later was entrusted by *Nelson* to take to England the news of his great victory. The despatches were sent in the charge of *Nelson's* flag captain of the *Vanguard*, Sir Edward Berry. Four days after sailing, the *Leander* fell in with and at once engaged the *Genereux*, a French ship of the line of eighty guns, whose broadside fire was more than double and whose crew was treble that of the British ship. After a fierce action lasting six and a half hours, the *Leander* was forced to surrender. She had repelled several French attempts to board her. Her hull was badly shattered by**

gunfire and she could not strike her colours as no mast was left standing. Ninety-two of her crew were killed or wounded. The *Genereux* had suffered nearly 300 casualties. Captain Thompson, who lost a leg, was court-martialled for the loss of his ship and knighted for his gallantry. The *Leander's* crest and her motto '*Qui Patitur Vincit*' (Who Suffers Conquers) are derived from this famous action.

The light cruiser of 1943 was a vessel far different from the sailing ship of 1798, but the *Leander* spirit was unchanged, and her motto held good. Many of her ship's company of 600 were 'hostilities only' men, not long away from farm, factory, shop or office in New Zealand: for not a few youngsters *Leander* was their first ship. But, in the words of her captain, 'the conduct and bearing of all hands during the action and during the trying passage back to harbour were a source of extreme pride and gratification to me. All behaved like veterans. The curtailment of *Leander's* part in the action was a bitter disappointment to me and everyone on board.'

It has been well said that 'however perfect the machines, war in the last analysis is fought by men whose nerves must remain steady to direct the machines, whose courage must remain high when they as well as their machines are in danger, whose discipline and training must be such that they work together'. Throughout that long day, officers and men of HMNZS *Leander* laboured resolutely and incessantly to save their sorely-stricken ship. How they succeeded has become one of the damage control classics of the [Navy](#).

When some 600 square feet of her structure was blown open to the sea, five compartments were completely flooded—the forward boiler-room, main switchboard room, forward dynamo room, low-power room, and the transmitting station. Five fuel-oil tanks were wrecked and two others badly contaminated with sea water. There were big leaks through a damaged bulkhead into No. 2 boiler-room and the passage on the port side, as well as into the stokers' mess-deck through the splits in the ship's side and the deck above. Major damage had been done to auxiliary machinery and steam, water, and fuel-oil pipe systems. It was found that

the ship could steam at slow speed on the two outer engines, taking steam from No. 3 boiler-room. A south-easterly course was set to return to harbour and the *Leander* gradually worked up to 12 knots. Communication was established with the destroyers *Radford* and *Jenkins*, which had been detached by Rear- Admiral Ainsworth to stand by the *Leander* and which acted as anti-submarine and anti-aircraft screen during the passage to **Tulagi**.

When No. 2 boiler-room had to be evacuated because of the stoppage of the air supply fans, it was not possible to close the stop valves of the main steam pipes because of the intense heat. Acting Chief Engine-room Artificer Morris Buckley <sup>5</sup> went back a few minutes later and at great risk in the darkness and escaping steam succeeded in shutting down the valves. Led by Chief Shipwright J. W. Stewart, <sup>6</sup> a damage control party set about the establishment of a flooding boundary. Working in almost total darkness and up to their waists in oil and water, they shored up damaged bulkheads and hatches and plugged holes and cracks. The most immediate danger was the imminent flooding of No. 2 boiler-room. Stoker Petty Officer A. Fickling <sup>7</sup> and Leading Stoker J. R. Haliday <sup>8</sup> volunteered to re-enter the compartment and shore up the damaged bulkhead. Measures were then taken to pump out the boiler-room by means of two portable electric pumps, with a capacity of sixty tons an hour, which kept the water level below the floor plates.

Commander S. W. Roskill <sup>9</sup> had been injured on the leg and nearly swept overboard by the explosion, but for some hours he directed the work of his damage control parties until incapacitated by his wound. 'The high standard of organisation and training shown by all hands was largely due to his initiative and leadership', said the captain's report. Regular drills, lectures, and demonstrations had made all officers and men 'damage control conscious', and it was for this reason that in spite of severe casualties among the senior ratings of one party, correct action on their own initiative was taken by the survivors. The general reaction was: 'Well, it was just what we had been told it would be like.' A seaman boy, Mervyn Kelly, <sup>10</sup> seventeen years of age, was employed as

**the commander's messenger. He, too, had been blown over and injured by the explosion, but he stuck gamely to his job, and during the period when all telephones were out of action he carried many important verbal messages speedily and accurately. He neither mentioned nor reported his injuries until long after daylight.**

**The port torpedo-tubes, which were about to be fired when the ship was hit, were dismantled by the explosion and most of their crew became casualties. A young petty officer, Charles A. Patchett,<sup>11</sup> though badly shaken, immediately organised the survivors and the crew of the starboard tubes into repair parties. They rapidly restored power to a number of important circuits, thus greatly assisting Chief Electrical Artificer W. R. J. Jones,<sup>12</sup> who had taken charge of all electrical repair parties when he learned that the commissioned electrician and his staff had been killed in the main switchboard compartment. When he heard that there were badly injured men on the stokers' mess-deck, Norman Craven,<sup>13</sup> the youngest member of the sick berth staff, at once volunteered to go there and assist the first aid parties. Under conditions requiring more than ordinary courage, he attended to wounded men, showing much initiative and a sound knowledge of his duties. Chief Petty Officer Telegraphist C. J. Rosbrook<sup>14</sup> showed great organising and technical ability in rapidly making good all breakdowns in the ship's wireless telegraphy system.**

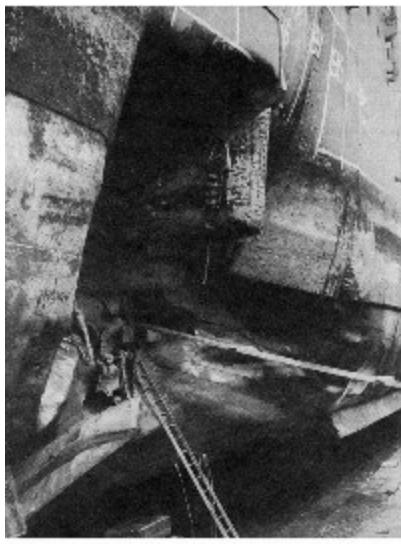
**The first casualty arrived at the main dressing station six minutes after the explosion occurred, and almost all the fifteen cases were treated there within the next ten minutes. The seriously injured suffered mainly from a combination of multiple fractures of leg and ankle bones and the effects of blast. All were standing up when they were injured, with the exception of a leading stoker who was seated at a desk. Two ratings standing one on either side of him were killed instantly. The behaviour and morale of the injured men was of a high order both during the action and afterwards, and they were unselfish in their insistence that 'we should treat the other fellow first', reported Surgeon Lieutenant-Commander E. S. McPhail.<sup>15</sup> 'They appeared to be far more concerned**



with the damage inflicted on the enemy than with their own condition and wounds.' Electric current failed in the main dressing station and forward first aid post, and emergency lighting had to be used until the repair parties restored power for the lights and sterilisers. The sick berth staff and auxiliary medical parties worked for eighteen hours without a break. Being in battle dress, all were continuously wet through as a result of perspiration from heat and lack of ventilation, but liberal rations of saline tablets and well-sweetened lime juice helped to prevent exhaustion. The condition of the wounded on their discharge to hospital was evidence of the medical staff's sound work.

The customary preparations for feeding the ship's company had been made before the action and proved adequate under most trying and difficult conditions. Approximately three days' normal supply of bread was already baked. Two sandwiches per man were prepared, coppers were filled with hot soup and cocoa, and a large tub of iced lime juice placed in the galley. The issue room was fully stocked with tinned foods, especially fruits, and emergency supplies were placed in the main store. No damage to galley or bakery was caused by the explosion, but no electric power, steam, or fuel-oil was available for cooking from the time of the action until the afternoon.





IN DEVONPORT DOCKYARD, AUCKLAND

IN DEVONPORT DOCKYARD, AUCKLAND

# **EPIISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2**

## **RETURN TO HARBOUR**

## *Return to Harbour*

**FOR EIGHTEEN HOURS** the engineers and stokers laboured in heat and semi-darkness to keep the ship afloat and steam her more than 200 miles back to harbour. Two-thirds of her boiler power was damaged and out of service. The only two available boilers, all the main and auxiliary machinery, and all the main and overflow feed water tanks were contaminated by salt water and fuel-oil. It is essential to good steaming and the safety of the plant that the water used to generate the high-pressure, superheated steam must be entirely free from salt and as pure as it is possible to make it. Distilled water is used, losses are made good by evaporators, and frequent tests are made in order to detect and quickly correct any salinity. But in the *Leander* all the rules of good steaming had been upset by the intricate and extensive damage to her vitals. The boiler feed water quickly became contaminated with salt water and fuel-oil. This caused almost continuous ‘priming’ \* of both boilers. Both sets of evaporators were put on to make up feed water and the main feed tanks were allowed to overflow continuously. The boilers were blown down every ten minutes in order to reduce the density, which at one time was three degrees. These drastic measures resulted in a reduction of the density, by the time the ship arrived in harbour, to less than one degree. Subsequent examination of the boilers showed that many of the tubes were so badly coated internally with oil residue that burning-out must have been imminent.

Terse but graphic was the account of his experiences written by a young stoker who was on duty in No. 3 boiler-room:

The supply fans roared to the demand for higher air pressure as the engine throttles were eased open for full speed. Stop! Full astern! Full ahead! Stokers whipped off oil sprayers, on sprayers; the ship heeled. Crash! Crash! Crash! Our boilers pulsated and roared. Furnace flames spat out with every salvo. Dull thuds around us. Bombs? No, enemy shells exploding in the sea, more likely. Loud speakers told us that our force had run into a Japanese cruiser and destroyer squadron. The ship

quivered as the salvoes thundered. A crash—sudden darkness—the ship lurching and heeling over—an almost incredible silence. The water tenders flashed their emergency lights, the chief of the watch wrenched his fan throttle closed, the leading stoker slammed to a stop his oil-fuel pump as the needle of the steam-pressure gauge started to creep up. No safety valve lifted. An electrical repair party eventually gave some power and lights. Bilge water crept across the floor plates. Minutes seemed like hours. Steam and water cut through gland packings, showering us with a scalding spray. Water levels raced from high to low in the gauge glasses, the boilers primed, turbo fans ‘hunted’, the steam pressure danced from high to low. We swung on valves, nursed our pumps and watched salty feed water upsetting all the laws of steady steaming. With communication lines dead and in semi-darkness we did our best to give steam. Slow ahead! Two sprayers on each boiler, one on each, two, three on each, and so on, hour after hour, steam roaring through leaking glands and blow-down valves open. All day we flogged those boilers. Nightfall saw us safe in harbour, battered, torn, but not beaten.

American fighter aircraft gave cover to the *Leander* from daylight on 13 July until her arrival in harbour. She was screened by the destroyers *Radford* and *Jenkins*, the latter being relieved by the *Taylor* at 8 a.m. Two other destroyers joined the escort during the afternoon and the *Leander* arrived in **Tulagi** harbour at seven o'clock, just after dark. There was a moving scene when the ship's company assembled on the forecastle in the brilliant light of a full tropical moon and the chaplain read prayers for the dead and of thanksgiving for the safety of the ship. The captain, standing by the capstan, read the names of the dead and missing.

The *Leander* spent a week in **Tulagi** harbour, where she was made sufficiently seaworthy to enable her to be steamed to **Auckland**. Escorted by the **United States** destroyers *Stack* and *Lang*, she left on 21 July for **Espiritu Santo**, whence she sailed four days later in company with the destroyer *Radford*, arriving at **Auckland** on the 29th. It was agreed with the Admiralty that temporary repairs to the hull and machinery should

be carried out in Devonport Dockyard and that the *Leander* should then to go a **United States** port for a complete refit and modernisation of armament and other equipment. On 1 November 1943 a memorial tablet placed in the chapel of HMNZS *Philomel* to commemorate the thirty-three officers and ratings who had been killed in action or had died in HMNZS *Leander* since September 1939, was dedicated by the Rt. Rev. W. H. Baddeley, DSO, MC, Bishop of **Melanesia** and honorary chaplain, RNZNVR.

The *Leander* sailed from **Auckland** for the last time on 25 November 1943, passed through the Panama Canal on 14 December, and left Colon four days later in company with two American destroyer-escorts for **Boston**. The weather in the **Atlantic** was fine and warm until the ships passed out of the Gulf Stream, after which the temperature fell thirty degrees in one hour and more than seventy degrees in twenty-four hours. It was below zero when the *Leander* and her escorts, thickly coated with snow and ice, arrived at **Boston** on 23 December.

During the next six weeks, drafts of officers and men left the *Leander* to go to England. On 14 January 1944, a frigate built in **Boston** was commissioned as HMS *Tyler* and manned by ratings from the *Leander* for the passage to the **United Kingdom**. Four officers and a number of specially selected ratings went to Norfolk, Virginia, to join a flotilla of six infantry landing craft for England.

HMNZS *Leander* finally paid off on 8 May 1944, thus ending an eventful commission in the **Royal New Zealand Navy** of just over seven years. Her ship's company were dispersed far and wide on war service, proud in the knowledge that the *Leander* had upheld her noble motto and the traditions of the four ships of that name who had preceded her in the **Royal Navy** since 1780.

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\* The carrying over of water spray with the steam from the boilers to the engines, with consequent danger of damage.

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# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## RECORD OF HMS LEANDER

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#### *First Leander*

Built 1780. Fourth rate of 1000 tons and 50 guns. In 1782 took part in reduction of Accra and other Dutch forts on Gold Coast, **West Africa**.

In 1783, while on convoy duty in the West Indies, the *Leander* sighted and engaged the French ship of the line *Pluton*, 74 guns. After a fierce action lasting two hours, though reduced to a wreck, three times set on fire, and repeatedly attacked by boarders, she put the Frenchman to flight.

In 1797, when **Nelson** made his ill-fated attack on Santa Cruz (and lost his arm), the *Leander* was one of his squadron.

In 1798 the *Leander* fought in the Battle of the **Nile**. A fortnight later she fought her famous action with the French ship of the line *Genereux*, 80 guns, by whom she was taken.

In 1799 the *Leander* was taken from the French by a Russian and Turkish force at the capture of Corfu and was restored to **Britain** by the Russian Emperor.

In 1805 the *Leander* captured the French 48-gun ship *Ville de Milan*, together with the latter's prize, the British 38-gun *Cleopatra*, taken a week previously.

In 1817 the *Leander* was sold out of the service for £2100.

#### *Second Leander*

Built 1814. Frigate of 1600 tons and 60 guns. In 1816 the *Leander*



took part in the expedition under Lord Exmouth against the Dey of **Algiers**, whose pirates were a constant menace to shipping in the **Mediterranean**. The defences of **Algiers** were formidable. The garrison numbered 40,000 and the batteries mounted 1000 guns. In this fierce action the *Leander's* casualties were heavy, more than a quarter of her ship's company of 500 being killed or wounded. As a result of the bombardment more than a thousand Christian slaves were set free and the Dey was made to pay a heavy indemnity.

### *Third Leander*

Built 1848. Fourth rate of 2000 tons and 50 guns. Took part in the Crimean War. At the time of the famous charge at Balaklava, the *Leander* was stationed at Eupatoria to prevent the Russians landing reinforcements. The ship was converted to steam in 1861.

### *Fourth Leander*

Built 1882. Second class cruiser of 4000 tons, mounting ten 6-inch guns and four torpedo-tubes. In 1900 she did good work during a revolution in **Panama** in protecting the lives and property of foreign residents. In 1904 she was converted into a destroyer depot ship and in that capacity served at Scapa Flow during the First World War.

### *Fifth Leander*

Light cruiser of 7270 tons displacement and 72,000 horse-power, mounting eight 6-inch and eight 4-inch guns and eight torpedo-tubes. Built at Devonport Dockyard and engined by Vickers-Armstrong Ltd. Launched in 1931 and completed in 1933. Name ship of a class of five light cruisers, the others being *Achilles*, *Ajax*, *Neptune*, and *Orion*. The *Leander* served as a New Zealand ship from 30 April 1937 till 8 May 1944.

### *Crest and Motto*

**The ship's motto is *Qui Patitur Vincit* (Who Suffers Conquers). The crest consists of 'An arm in armour holding a lance proper between two lotus flowers argent on wavelets or and vert'.**

# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

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# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

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# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

### *Biographical Notes*

<sup>1</sup>Vice-Admiral J. W. RIVETT-CARNAC, CB, CBE, DSC; born England, 12 Dec 1891; served First World War, 1914–18 (DSC); captain of HMS *Leander* and Commodore Commanding NZ Squadron, 1937–39; captain HMS *Rodney*, 1941–43; promoted Rear-Admiral, 1943; Flag Officer, British Assault Area, **Normandy**, 1944; Vice-Admiral (Q) **British Pacific Fleet**, 1945–47; retired 1947.

<sup>2</sup>Rear-Admiral H. E. HORAN, DSC; born **Ireland**, 12 Aug 1890; served First World War, 1914–18 (DSC, Aug 1914); captain HMS *Barham*, 1937–38; Chief of Naval Staff, New Zealand, 1938–40; captain HMS *Leander*, 1940; Combined Operations Headquarters, 1941–43; Rear-Admiral (retd.) commanding Combined Operations Bases (Western Approaches), 1943–46.

<sup>3</sup>Captain R. H. BEVAN, RN; born England, 26 May 1892; served First World War, 1914–18; captain HMS *Leander*, 1940–42; retired (ill-health) 1942; commanded HMS *Collingwood* (training establishment) 1943–45.

<sup>4</sup>Rear-Admiral C. A. L. MANSERGH, CB, DSC, m.i.d., US Silver Star; born England, 7 Oct 1898; served First World War, 1914–18 (DSC); captain HMNZS *Achilles*, 1942–43; HMNZS *Leander*, Feb-Oct 1943; commanded HMS *Implacable*, 1946–47; promoted Rear-Admiral, 1948.

<sup>5</sup>Chief Engine-room Artificer M. BUCKLEY, m.i.d., RN; born Northwich, Cheshire, England, 3 Dec 1914; fitter; joined **Royal Navy** 14 Jan 1936; took discharge 7 May 1948.

<sup>6</sup>Chief Shipwright J. W. STEWART, DSM, RN; born Ardrossan, **Scotland**, 21 Feb 1903; shipwright; joined New Zealand Division Royal Navy 21 Jun 1923; took discharge 4 Oct 1946.

<sup>7</sup>Stoker Petty Officer A. FICKLING, DSM, RNZN; born Tottenham, London, 15 Apr 1909; joined New Zealand Division Royal Navy 15 Nov 1927; took discharge 23 Oct 1946.

<sup>8</sup>Petty Officer Stoker Mechanician J. R. HALIDAY, RNZN; born Thames, 9 Aug 1921; joined RNZN Oct 1940; now Petty Officer Stoker Mechanician.

<sup>9</sup>Captain S. W. ROSKILL, DSC, RN; born England, 1 Aug 1903; acting-captain in command of *Leander*, Oct 1943-Apr 1944; promoted captain Jun 1944; retired 1949.

<sup>10</sup>Seaman Boy, 1st Class, M. A. KELLY; born Waimate, 4 Feb 1926; joined RNZN 14 May 1942; took discharge 2 Apr 1947.

<sup>11</sup>Petty Officer C. A. PATCHETT, m.i.d., RNZN; born Blenheim, 4 Sep 1912; joined New Zealand Division Royal Navy 5 Feb 1928; Long Service and Good Conduct Medals.

<sup>12</sup>Chief Electrical Artificer W. R. J. JONES, DSM, RN; born Pretoria, South Africa, 22 Dec 1905; joined Royal Navy 21 Mar 1927.

<sup>13</sup>Sick Berth Attendant N. CRAVEN, m.i.d., RNZN; born Whangarei, 30 Mar 1921; joined RNZN 30 Jan 1942; took discharge 18 Apr 1946.

<sup>14</sup>Chief Petty Officer Telegraphist C. J. ROSBROOK, m.i.d., RN; born London, 18 May 1905; joined Royal Navy as boy, 17 Aug 1921.

<sup>15</sup>Surgeon Captain E. S. MCPHAIL, VRD, m.i.d., RNZNVR; born Invercargill, 25 Dec 1899; now Surgeon Captain, RNZN, Director of Naval Medical Services.

# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

### *Acknowledgments*

**THIS NARRATIVE is based on Admiralty documents, New Zealand naval records, and Japanese official reports. The maps, ship silhouette, and badge were drawn by L. D. McCormick from material contained in official sources. The photographs come from various collections which are stated where they are known:**

**The Weekly News Cover**

***New Zealand Army Official, M. D. Elias* Inside Cover and **page 16****

***T. W. Collins* **page 5, page 20, and page 28****

***Ministry of Works* **page 13 ( top)****

***F. M. Glasson* **page 13 ( bottom), page 15 ( top), page 18 ( bottom)****

***Captain R. H. Bevan, RN* **page 14****

***P. S. Cooper* **page 17 ( bottom) and page 19****

# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## [BACKMATTER]

**THE AUTHOR, Sydney David Waters, is a New Zealand journalist who has specialised in naval and merchant shipping affairs. He is the author of two histories of the New Zealand Shipping Company, *Clipper Ship to Motor-liner* and *Ordeal by Sea*, and of *Pamir: the story of a Sailing Ship*. He served as a gunner in the 1st NZEF during the First World War.**

# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## [BACKMATTER]

THE TYPE USED THROUGHOUT THE SERIES IS *Aldine Bembo* WHICH WAS REVIVED FOR MONO- TYPE  
FROM A RARE BOOK PRINTED BY ALDUS IN 1495 \* THE TEXT IS SET IN 12 POINT ON A BODY OF 14 POINT

# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## MALTA AIRMEN

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DATE PUBLISHED PAGE

COVER PHOTOGRAPH

**EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2**

**[TITLE PAGE]**

**MALTA AIRMEN**

**J. A. WHELAN**

**WAR HISTORY BRANCH**

**DEPARTMENT OF INTERNAL AFFAIRS WELLINGTON, NEW ZEALAND**

**1951**

# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

[EDITORPAGE]

**THIS SERIES** *will be completed in 24 numbers, of which this is the 17th. It presents detailed accounts of episodes characteristic of the fighting in the Second World War and studies of certain aspects of New Zealand's war experience, illustrated with material for which space will not otherwise be available. Binding cases for this series can be obtained from booksellers.*

*This number deals with the services of New Zealand airmen in the defence of **Malta**, vital to the success of our operations in the **Mediterranean** and **Middle East**. Other numbers of this series dealing with the experiences of New Zealanders serving in the **RAF** are **Aircraft against U-Boat**, **Early Operations with Bomber Command**, and **New Zealanders in the Battle of Britain**. The research and preliminary narratives for the full story have nearly been completed by a team of New Zealand Air Force officers working in **London**. The first volume, written by **Wing-Commander H. L. Thompson**, will be ready for publication this year.*

*The Assault on **Rabaul** deals with one of the operations of the Royal New Zealand **Air Force**. The history of the **RNZAF**, from its birth in 1923 to the end of the war, has been completed in draft form by **Squadron-Leader J. M. S. Ross** and should also be ready for publication during 1951. In both cases printing difficulties are likely to delay actual publication.*

**H. K. KIPPENBERGER**

,  
**Major-General**  
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF



# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## A MILITARY LIABILITY

## **A MILITARY LIABILITY**

**‘The key to our position in the whole Mediterranean lay in Malta.’**

**Marshal of the Royal Air Force Lord Tedder, Cambridge University, 1947**

**ON A CLEAR DAY from the Grand Harbour of Malta the coast of Sicily is visible as a faint blue line on the horizon only sixty miles away. Throughout 1939, with the Italian Air Force well established in Sicily and able to assemble up to 900 first-line aircraft, Malta lay under the threat of Axis air power. It was officially believed that little use could be made of the island as a naval or air base should the war spread to the Mediterranean, a belief which had prevailed since sanctions against Italy were mooted in 1935. Moreover, there was some justification in the assumption that, in the Central Mediterranean, French forces from the West could co-operate adequately with the Royal Navy and Imperial forces from Egypt, while Italy itself could be attacked from the Tunisian airfields. \* The difficulty of holding Malta might therefore have no grave consequences. The island's long history, which had seen it as the military fortress of the Knights of St. John and as Nelson's ‘important outwork to India’, now seemed temporarily to be closed. As the year 1940 opened, Italian intentions became clear; accordingly, the Royal Navy withdrew its Mediterranean Fleet to Gibraltar and Alexandria, and the Royal Air Force dispersed its squadrons. There were plans for four fighter squadrons based on Malta but the Battle of France was approaching; no squadrons were sent and His Majesty's Aircraft Carrier *Glorious* was withdrawn with her squadrons of fighters to take part in the Norwegian campaign. In the shadow of the airfields of Sicily and Southern Italy, it was difficult to see how Malta, which had been held in turn as a fortress and a naval base, could persist as an aerodrome.**

**In the three eventful years that followed, during which the Royal Air Force both defended the island and demonstrated its unique value in the Mediterranean campaigns, Malta's airmen made a proud record. By the end of 1942 the defensive years in the Mediterranean were over; it is with those years that this account is concerned. The airmen who made**

up this small force on the island came from every part of the British Commonwealth. New Zealand representation was necessarily not large—a total of 84 New Zealanders served in **Malta** during this period—but two of the three Air Officers Commanding were New Zealanders.

On 26 January 1940 Air Commodore F. H. M. Maynard, AFC, <sup>1</sup> a New Zealand officer in the **Royal Air Force**, was appointed to **Malta** as Air Officer Commanding, **Royal Air Force, Mediterranean**. Maynard had had long service in the air arm. He had joined the Royal Naval Air Service in 1915, and in the inter-war years had spent two tours of duty in the **Middle East** and had held various commands in the organisation for the Air Defence of Great Britain. He came to **Malta** from the **Air Ministry**.

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\* Three years of war in the **Mediterranean** were to pass before this strategy became possible.

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Air Commodore Maynard's contribution to the new chapter in **Malta's** history was his conviction that the island could be held. The record of his sixteen months in command at **Malta** is not so much one of dramatic air successes as of difficult strategic decisions made on the most tenuous resources. Determined to offer some opposition, Maynard was fortunate to find four Gladiator biplanes still in their packing cases which the *Glorious* had left behind. On 19 April he formed a fighter flight at Hal Far airfield, where three of these obsolete fighters were assembled, given the names of 'Faith', 'Hope', and 'Charity', and flown by members of his personal staff and surplus flying-boat pilots.

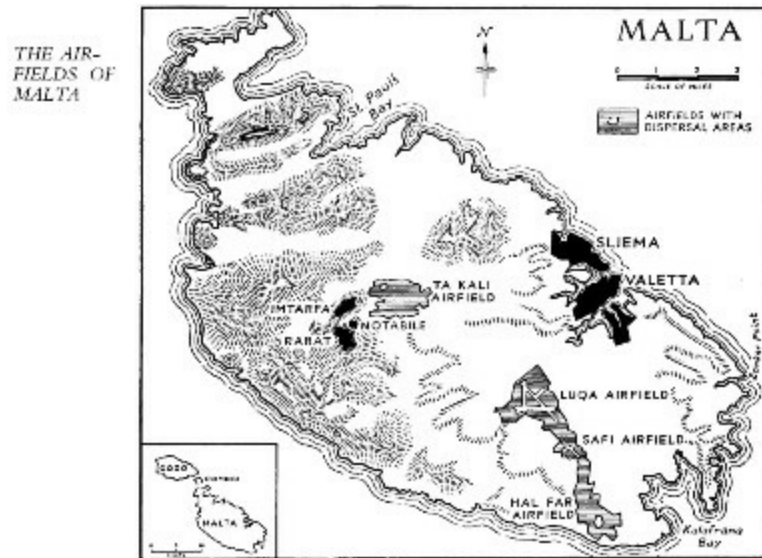
**Malta** could do little but wait for the Italians to begin the fight. At midnight on 10 June 1940 **Italy** declared war. The *Regia Aeronautica* was not slow to start. The island had its first air raid at dawn, followed by seven more before nightfall and by forty-nine before the month ended. Air Commodore Maynard also succeeded in retaining four Hurricanes which were in transit through **France** to Egypt; his total of seven fighters, backed by the Army's anti-aircraft defences and an efficient radar warning system, enabled the island to survive. Under the

Governor- General, Sir William Dobbie, air-raid precautions were well organised and the morale of the Maltese remained generally high. Maynard was assisted by a lack of real enemy aggressiveness, for from the Italian point of view there was no need for haste: **Mussolini's** attention was attracted to **Albania**, where unbeknown to his Axis partner he was preparing an invasion of **Greece**. But on 25 June 1940 the whole strategic picture abruptly darkened. **France** fell, a German Armistice Commission visited **Tunisia**, and the entire **Mediterranean** coastline, save Egypt, Palestine, and the islands of **Cyprus** and **Malta**, was closed to the British Fleet. **Malta**, lying in the Narrow Seas of the Central Mediterranean, was now the **Royal Air Force's** loneliest command, for the nearest British base at **Alexandria** was some 800 miles away and Gibraltar almost 1000. **Italy** could cut the **Mediterranean** in two if she could eliminate the island airfield.

**Malta** offered special problems for an Air Commander. From the air it was a compact and seemingly easy target, measuring only seventeen miles by nine, with an area of about ninety- five square miles. Two islands, Comino and Gozo, lie conveniently off the north-west tip to orient any incoming pilot. The four military targets, the Grand Harbour and the three airfields, were confined in the eastern half of this small area and linked only by dusty and tortuous lanes. The condition of the airfields was poor. Hal Far on the south coast was a narrow strip, limited by rocky outcrops and ravines. Ta Kali to the north, dominated by hills on three sides and familiar to Italian civil pilots, had been built on the site of an ancient lake and its grass surface bogged easily. But despite the unpromising future, Air Commodore Maynard persisted with the building of a bomber airfield at Luqa, in the centre of the island, overlooking **Valetta** and the Grand Harbour. Its construction was a triumph of ingenuity, since the whole area had to be levelled from hills, quarries, and nullahs. Villages, each with its large church, crowded upon the airfield. There were no tools for airfield construction, yet the most primitive Maltese labouring methods with horse and cart succeeded in building the longest runway on the island, 1200 yards of tarmac. Aircraft dispersal was a major problem, since every yard of the island's



poor soil was needed for food crops. But Malta's stone-walled roads were put to good use in forming the celebrated Safi strip, which linked Luqa and Hal Far airfields in a unique dispersal area.



THE AIRFIELDS OF MALTA

One natural advantage was the island's pale limestone which was soft to work and yet hardened quickly on exposure. The fact that it was an island of rock contributed largely to Malta's survival. Given the labour, bomb damage could be readily repaired, and fire, which devastated the bombed European cities, was no real danger. The people went underground. Natural caves and the old tunnels of a defunct railway were enlarged by British coalminers, now working as Royal Engineers' tunnellers, to form adequate air-raid shelters. When raiding aircraft were close to the island, ships in the Grand Harbour were put on the alert by a yellow flag while the congested population were warned by a red flag and siren. The 270,000 inhabitants prepared for a state of siege. The ancient underground granaries of the Knights of St. John were a safe store for the island's supply of grain. But Malta, which had depended for its existence on peacetime Service establishments, was virtually unproductive, and stocks of food and all war material had to come by sea. Above all, petrol, the bugbear of every Mediterranean commander, was at a premium. Public transport stopped; horses, it was true, pulled carozzins for hire, but were marked down as 'reserve meat

ration'.

For these first seven months of Italian attack **Malta** continued unexpectedly to survive. Convoys came through under cover of the Battle Fleet, and gradually Air Commodore Maynard built up a Hurricane fighter defence, obtaining reinforcements from Egypt or by aircraft-carrier through the Western Mediterranean, in spite of the pressing need for these fighters in Great Britain. Maynard carefully husbanded his forces. On a coloured chart in his office was plotted every type of operation against the weekly allowance of petrol. There was soon a complete Hurricane squadron, of which Flight-Sergeant R. J. Hyde <sup>2</sup> was a member, and formations of up to twenty Italian Fiat fighters and **Savoia**-Marchetti bombers were met and dispersed by seldom more than two Hurricanes and one Gladiator. By the beginning of August Maynard's view that **Malta** could not only be held but used to tremendous advantage was definitely accepted. While Royal **Air Force** aircraft supplied accurate reconnaissance, Royal Naval surface craft, submarines, and torpedo-bombers were increasingly successful in their attacks on Italian merchant vessels running to North Africa. Equally valuable was the island's use, with Gibraltar, as a vital link in the aircraft reinforcement route to the **Middle East**.

By October Italian plans in the **Mediterranean** were beginning to go awry, and the German High Command, which had originally intended to leave the **Mediterranean** area in the hands of **Italy** while concentrating on the Russian offensive for the summer of 1941, was forced to adopt a more positive role in the Central Mediterranean. By January 1941 Italian forces were ignominiously retreating in North Africa, while the Italian Navy was proving incapable of commanding the **Mediterranean**, with the losses at **Taranto** and, later, at Matapan, as outstanding instances. **Malta** was unsubdued, and the German decision to reinforce the Italian Army in North **Africa** required the neutralisation of this island base. Accordingly, a complete coastal air group, *Fliegerkorps X*, was transferred from **Norway** to **Sicily** with some 260 first-line aircraft, mostly Stuka dive-bombers and Messerschmitt 109 fighters. On 10

January His Majesty's Aircraft Carrier *Illustrious* limped back into the Grand Harbour after being heavily hit, and the period which became known as the '*Illustrious* blitz' had begun. But Malta stood firm, as it had against the Italian Air Force. Its shipping offensive, however, practically ceased, while the **Luftwaffe** forced the re-routing of **Middle East** convoys around the Cape of Good Hope, thus impeding the supply of war material to the British forces in **Greece** and allowing the free running of Axis convoys to North Africa. Again other campaigns produced distractions, and in April 1941 the **Luftwaffe**, after transferring its dive-bombers to Rommel's **Afrika Korps**, left **Sicily** to support the **Balkan** and Russian campaigns. Enemy operations over **Malta** devolved again upon the Italian Air Force, and there was a general lull.

Air Vice-Marshal Maynard, \* who had guided **Malta** through the Italian and German offensives in turn, could now be relieved. His achievements had been considerable. In the face of superior types of enemy aircraft and immensely superior numbers, his handful of fighters had been credited with fifty aircraft destroyed and as many damaged. The island now boasted two complete Hurricane squadrons. Maynard initiated plans for a swift build-up of the fighter defence in preparation for the island's coming offensive role. During May and June 1941 185 Hurricanes, some of which were destined for the **Middle East** theatre, were flown into **Malta** from aircraft-carriers. Maynard's development of Luqa airfield was proving invaluable, and in the attack on the Axis sea lanes the **Royal Air Force**, whose function to date had largely been reconnaissance, could share the offensive with the **Royal Navy**. It was clear that **Malta** was not the 'military liability' which it had appeared at the outbreak of war. On 1 June 1941 Air Vice-Marshal Maynard handed over his command to Air Vice-Marshal H. P. Lloyd. <sup>3</sup>

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\* In February 1941 Maynard's post in **Malta** was regraded from Air Commodore to Air Vice-Marshal. By a special award, in recognition of the defence of the island, he was created a Companion of the Order of the Bath.

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# **EPIISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2**

## **THE FLYING-BOAT UNION**

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**THROUGHOUT** the first half of 1941, while the **Royal Air Force** in **Malta** struggled to defend itself and to maintain reconnaissances over the **Mediterranean** basin, a singular series of operations was flown by seven New Zealanders in two Sunderland flying-boat squadrons. Nos. 228 and 230 Squadrons, the latter being brought in as reinforcement from China Bay, **Ceylon**, were never more than fourteen aircraft strong, and they worked hard. These early pilots were members of the self-styled 'Flying-Boat Union' which had been strong in the pre-war years, for the flying-boat captains took a considerable pride in their individuality of command, patterning it in many ways on sea-going naval procedure. This ingrained independence was to prove a valuable asset in the lean years of **Mediterranean** air warfare, by virtue of the wide variety of tasks which the Sunderlands could perform. Their main duty was to make long-range reconnaissances and anti-submarine patrols over the eastern half of the **Mediterranean**. Successes in the latter duty were rare, although Flight-Lieutenant D. N. Milligan, <sup>4</sup> of No. 230 Squadron, while making a sweep to cover a Fleet movement, was credited with damaging an Italian submarine. Flight-Lieutenant H. L. M. Glover, <sup>5</sup> who had returned to the **Royal Air Force** from civil flying with Imperial Airways, was detailed on 3 April 1941 as navigational escort to a force of incoming reinforcement fighters. He circled a rendezvous point off Galatea Island and intercepted six Hurricanes and one Skua which had been flown off the aircraft-carrier *Ark Royal* and led them back to **Malta**. Seven days later Flight-Lieutenant A. Frame <sup>6</sup> carried the Middle East Army and Air Commanders-in-Chief, General Sir Archibald Wavell and Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Longmore, from **Alexandria** to Scaramanga in **Greece**. As the air attacks on **Malta** increased, and since the flying-boats at their moorings at Kalafrana Bay were particularly vulnerable, Air Vice-Marshal Maynard moved their headquarters to Aboukir Bay at **Alexandria**, and **Malta** became their forward base.

At the end of April every available Sunderland was pressed into use to assist in the evacuation of **Greece**. Two New Zealand pilots played a

notable part, together with **Bombay** and **Lodestar** transport aircraft of both the **Royal Air Force** and the **British Overseas Airways Corporation**, in ferrying soldiers and airmen to **Crete**. Flight-Lieutenant **Frame** evacuated more than 200 men in all. On 24 April he flew his **Sunderland** to **Nauplion Bay** in the Bay of **Argos** to evacuate **Royal Air Force** personnel. On arrival, just before dusk, it was found that the **Royal Air Force** party had moved on, but 25 passengers, including a **British General**, were taken aboard during the night. At dawn **Frame** found that the whole bay was enveloped in dense black smoke from an ammunition ship and a troopship which had been bombed in the harbour the previous afternoon. After taxi-ing around for a considerable time to find a clear patch, he decided to make a blind take-off on a course given by his navigator. Fortunately, the **Sunderland** did not hit any of the floating debris and the evacuees were safely landed at **Suda Bay** in **Crete**.

On the same day, 25 April, Flight-Lieutenant **H. W. Lamond**<sup>7</sup> was detailed to search for a party in the **Githeon** area in **Greece**. At **Githeon** Greek officers in laboured French directed him to a bay farther south-west, where the crew observed flashes from a hand mirror and picked up 52 officers and men of a **Royal Air Force** fighter squadron. **Lamond** returned immediately to evacuate a party which **Frame** had noted near **Kalamata**. He took aboard 72 men waiting in the harbour area. This still stands as the record number of passengers ever carried in flight by a **Sunderland**. **Lamond** carefully disposed his passengers to balance the aircraft, firmly preventing anyone, irrespective of rank, from bringing aboard any luggage or personal effects. Carrying only 400 gallons of petrol, the **Sunderland** finally became airborne after ricocheting off the harbour. The same evening at eleven o'clock **Lamond** returned to **Kalamata** to deliver a message to a senior officer of the remaining **Royal Air Force** personnel. The take-off had been made without a flare path and there was none available for the landing, which was attempted by the use of the aircraft's landing light on a glassy and deceptive surface. The pilot found it practically impossible to judge his height, and the aircraft hit the sea heavily and broke up. **Lamond** and three of his crew were the only survivors. A portion of the hull remained afloat, and on

**this the four stayed until Lamond's shouts attracted the attention of a small Greek fishing boat; the search party from the shore had failed to locate the wreck and had given up the search. Three of the aircrew, including Flight-Lieutenant Lamond, were taken to a military hospital where they later became prisoners of war. For his share in the evacuation Lamond was awarded the Greek Distinguished Flying Cross.**

**There was a further diversion in early July when Flying-Officer D. N. Milligan and Flight- Lieutenant A. Frame were detailed to co-operate in the Syrian campaign, searching for fast Vichy ships which were running the Allied blockade between the [Aegean Sea](#) and the Syrian coast. But the major duty of the two squadrons at this time was to fly an important shuttle service to [Malta](#) from Egypt, carrying essential supplies such as torpedoes and ammunition, as well as VIPs \* and [Royal Air Force](#) ground personnel.**

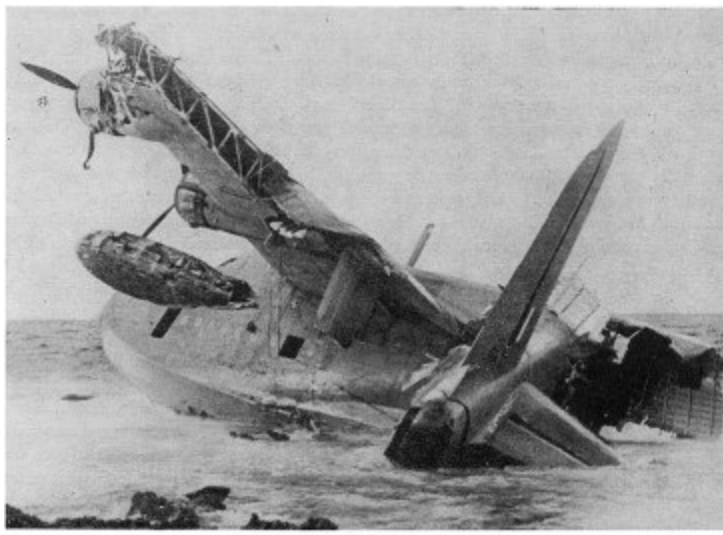
**By December 1941 this service to the isolated garrison had become routine, but one particular sortie, assisted by the then fluid state of the North African campaign, developed abruptly into what was perhaps the most eventful air operation of the year. At 2.15 a.m. on 22 December, Flight-Lieutenant S. W. R. Hughes <sup>8</sup> took off from Aboukir in Egypt for Kalafrana Bay. On board also, as a passenger, was Pilot-Officer G. H. Easton, <sup>9</sup> a Wellington-bomber pilot, who had crashed on operations and was returning with his crew to [Malta](#). The aircraft hugged the friendly coast of North Cyrenaica, but when approximately fifty miles north-east of [Benghazi](#) it was attacked by two Messerschmitt 110 fighters. The encounter was brief: one of the Messerschmitts was probably destroyed and the other retired; but two [Royal Air Force](#) gunners were wounded, one seriously, and a passenger was killed, while the two starboard engines of the Sunderland were put out of action and the starboard aileron shot away. Land was just in sight, and as the aircraft rapidly lost height, Flight-Lieutenant Hughes, exercising all his experience, succeeded in turning it into the wind and made a safe forced-landing on the water. A heavy sea was running, and the Sunderland ricocheted twice but finally came to rest. The starboard wing-tip float was smashed,**



but the crew kept the flying-boat from capsizing by ranging their weight along the port wing and ensuring that the good float remained in the water. In this fashion, behind a strong north-east wind, the Sunderland 'sailed' stern first into land. It struck a reef, and two hours later was still firmly lodged and beginning to break up. An attempt had to be made to reach the shore. The wounded man was given morphia, put into the only serviceable dinghy and towed through the surf. In all, there were twenty men on board the aircraft, and two at a time they slid down the wing into the sea. The second-pilot was nearly drowned as a strong undertow carried him away, but Flight-Lieutenant Hughes, who was a strong swimmer, eventually dragged him ashore after a struggle lasting nearly half an hour.

By midday the party found themselves on a rocky beach, which they estimated, accurately, to be approximately 100 miles east of **Benghazi**. Italian soldiers suddenly appeared from behind a wall of rocks, and Flight-Lieutenant Hughes decided to go forward and surrender as his exhausted party was without arms. To his astonishment the nearest Italian raised his rifle above his head, threw it away ostentatiously, and advanced with outstretched hands. The British party had not quite recovered from seeing the soldiers behave as friends when another group of about eighty Italians arrived. This group was more aggressive and formally declared the British party to be their prisoners. Hughes, however, had one duty to fulfil, and with the pretext of searching for the wounded gunner's flying boots he returned to the wreck and jettisoned into the sea a bag of one hundred pounds' weight of gold sovereigns, which had been destined for the **Malta** Exchequer. Back on shore, a stretcher made of oars from the dinghy was improvised for the wounded man, and in a long procession the mixed band started off along the coast. It was raining and streaks of lightning lit up a leaden sky. Night came, and with it small comfort. There were no blankets, rations, or water, and no fires were allowed as the Italians feared Arab sharpshooters.





*The Sunderland broke up (page 8)*

***The Sunderland broke up ( page 8)***

**The second-pilot and the gunner were both suffering from shock, and the party huddled around them, massaging them constantly in an effort to keep them warm. At dawn another start was made. Suddenly twenty Italian officers ran forward from a cluster of bushes. Highly agitated, they indicated to Flight-Lieutenant Hughes that the Germans had taken their vehicles and told them to get to safety as best they could. They offered to help the party in exchange for favoured treatment should they be captured by the British. Again, for the fourth time, the party was increased in number, on this occasion by an Italian major with about one hundred men. The Major was a unique personage, middle-aged, with a heavily-tanned and deeply-lined face. He carried a cat-o'-nine-tails at his belt, presumably as a fly-whisk, but he used it for its original purpose later when one of the British party indignantly announced that an Italian soldier had stolen the wounded man's flying boots. The thief was flogged in front of his comrades. Later that day the wounded air-gunner died and the Major conducted a form of military burial.**

**In due course the party arrived at the [Senussi](#) village of El Hania. Here they were given macaroni and coffee: three eggs were bartered for a wrist watch and a two-shilling piece, and a bag of dates cost one Egyptian pound. The Major sent for Flight-Lieutenant Hughes and told him that he proposed to leave for [Benghazi](#). The question arose as to who actually held the town and finally bets were made on it. The Italian**

decided that he would leave with his men, allowing the British to remain with the Arabs, and he offered to leave rifles for their protection. Once the Italians had gone, the **Senussi** freely disclosed an abundance of food and sent a messenger towards the advancing British lines. Hughes and his party decided to follow, hoping to reach an Indian Army unit which the Arabs reported to be some fifteen miles away.

The end of this incident was equally remarkable. After walking for an hour, the Royal Air Force party overtook some of the Italian Major's men. One of these ran over to the group, drew his bayonet, propped it against a rock, and jumped on it until it snapped. There were some two dozen Italians, each of whom threw away his rifle or handed it over and cheerfully joined the procession. Similar incidents happened on four occasions, and after three hours the company was more than a hundred and fifty strong. The British lines were soon reached, for the **Eighth Army** was making a bid to take **Benghazi** by Christmas, and Flight-Lieutenant Hughes, who had successfully led his men through the whole grim yet whimsical adventure, added his prisoners to those of the Army.

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\* Very Important Persons

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# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## CUTTING THE AXIS SUPPLY LINES

## **CUTTING THE AXIS SUPPLY LINES**

**THE STORY** of the air war in **Malta**, once the air defence of the island had been established, was essentially one of naval co-operation. During the second half of 1941, as **Malta** enjoyed a respite from German air attack, this theme became dominant. By June the pendulum of Mediterranean land warfare had swung eastward; the **Afrika Korps** had by-passed **Tobruk** and recaptured **Cyrenaica**, and **Greece** and **Crete** had fallen. A British counter-offensive into **Cyrenaica** was being planned for the end of the year, and the next six months were to decide to what extent British sea and air attack, by cutting the Axis supply lines to North Africa, could support it.

There were two main enemy shipping routes, the new eastern route between **Crete** and **Benghazi**, where there was little more than 200 miles of open sea to cross, and the western route from **Naples** to **Tripoli**. **Royal Navy** submarines and light surface craft, and **Swordfish** torpedo-bombers of the **Fleet Air Arm**, whose pilots won a high reputation for the courage and accuracy with which they handled these obsolescent 'Stringbags', were responsible for most of **Malta's** shipping strikes. The **Royal Air Force** on the island was still not strong enough in numbers nor did it possess a satisfactory type of aircraft for anti-shipping attacks, and its main contribution was reconnaissance of enemy ports and convoy movements. Air reconnaissance was applied extensively whenever it was learned that a convoy was in preparation, and in this way the **Air Officer Commanding** and the **Royal Naval** authorities obtained a full picture of the port organisation at **Naples** and **Brindisi** on the Italian mainland, at the **Sicilian** and **Greek** intermediary ports, and at the **North African** ports of discharge. It was rarely that an enemy convoy sailed to North Africa without the knowledge of the **Malta** authorities, and rarely were its whereabouts at sea unknown for long. **Flying-Officer J. R. Bloxam** <sup>10</sup> flew consistently in the **Glenn-Martin Maryland** aircraft \* of **No. 69 Squadron**, which was **Malta's** chief means of sea reconnaissance. These aircraft were fast and reliable and carried a rear gunner, so that the squadron could make its sorties in the wide sea area bounded by **Tripoli**,

**Sardinia, Naples, and Greece, largely with impunity.**

On 15 April Bloxam shadowed a convoy of five merchant vessels escorted by three destroyers off the island of Pantelleria, north-west of **Malta**. As a result of his reports, a destroyer force led by Captain Lord Louis Mountbatten was directed to the target; Bloxam later reported all the merchant vessels and two destroyers lying beached on the Kerkennah Banks off the Tunisian coast. On 25 June he tracked an important convoy of four merchant vessels, each of 15–20,000 tons, escorted by six destroyers, which was passing through the Straits of Messina. Following on his report, each aircraft of his squadron was promptly armed with two 500-lb. bombs and ordered to attack. The squadron lost one aircraft but achieved no definite results. The convoy eluded naval attack and crossed the **Mediterranean**. Three days later, however, Bloxam led a dusk patrol of three Marylands which found the convoy off the North African coast near **Tripoli**. In a dive-bombing attack at least one 15,000-ton Italian troopship was left on fire.

For its attacks on shipping the **Royal Air Force** relied in the main on a daylight offensive by pairs of **Blenheim** aircraft. This form of attack proved extremely hazardous, just as it had done over the North Sea and the **English Channel**. There was small hope of cloud cover, and the tactics employed were to fly low over the sea directly at the target ship. Over the ship, and at mast height, the Blenheims dropped a closely spaced stick of four 250-lb. bombs, which were fitted with eleven-second delay fuses to allow the aircraft to escape the blast. But the Axis soon armed their ships more heavily, and the Blenheims became an easy target. Their losses rose until they had to be largely withdrawn from this work and used only against enemy convoys of extreme importance—the average life of a **Blenheim** crew on this duty was one month. There was some relief with the formation of a Naval Co-operation Group in **Middle East Command**, and with **Malta** these additional **Blenheim** squadrons struggled to close the central gap through which Axis shipping was passing. This was becoming increasingly important, for in North **Africa** the long-awaited British offensive was due to begin in November.

On 18 August Pilot-Officer J. Buckley <sup>11</sup> attacked a 9000-ton merchant ship which had run aground off the island of Lampedusa as a result of an attack by Fleet Air Arm Swordfish aircraft. A swarm of destroyers, torpedo-boats, and lighters were salvaging the deck cargo of motor transport as the **Blenheim** made a lone attack through a curtain of anti-aircraft fire. Although wounded on his run-in, Buckley scored hits and set the ship on fire. Subsequent reconnaissance photographs showed that a 700-ton sloop, which was alongside, was also sunk.

Flying-Officer V. Allport <sup>12</sup> of No. 18 Squadron sank a large Italian merchant vessel, and on 26 November Flight-Lieutenant E. G. Edmunds <sup>13</sup> led six **Blenheims** of the same squadron on a shipping sweep east of **Tripoli**. Because of very bad weather only one aircraft was able to stay in formation, but Edmunds, ably assisted by his navigator, flew on with this one accompanying aircraft and covered the 200 miles of sea to the target area. In very bad visibility he located and scored hits on a troopship and an escorting destroyer. On the following day the troopship was seen stationary two miles outside **Tripoli**. Two days later Flight-Lieutenant Edmunds and the same navigator led another low-level attack on shipping at Navarino Bay in **Greece**, despite intense fire from the shore and from destroyers at their moorings. A 6000-ton tanker was hit at least six times and left on fire. On 11 December, a week after his immediate award of the DFC, Flight-Lieutenant Edmunds was killed in action. The **Blenheims** persisted with these hazardous sorties, since the land offensive in North Africa was in a critical stage and every effort had to be made.

As a result of combined air and naval action from **Malta**, enemy shipping losses in the summer and autumn months between July and October 1941, which were vital to the approaching British offensive, increased considerably. The minimum assessment of North African shipping sunk or damaged by our air and naval forces was 16 per cent for July; by October it was 63 per cent, and approximately half this total was claimed by aircraft. In all, 165,000 tons of shipping was definitely sunk in this period, with a further 75,000 tons added by the end of the

year. Vice- Admiral Weichold, the German liaison officer with the Italian Navy, noted that if this rate of loss should continue, the African campaign was bound to die a natural death. Once more the **Luftwaffe** moved quickly. Field-Marshal Kesselring, an officer with an extremely successful record in **Poland** and **Russia**, was transferred with a complete air force, *Luftflotte* II, from the **Moscow** area and appointed Commander-in-Chief, South, a position which he was to hold for two years. The bulk of the reinforcement went to **Sicily**, for the German intention was to dispose finally of **Malta**, a commitment which the Italian Air Force had again failed to fulfil. The German High Command assessed that 'from the enemy's (i.e., British) point of view, **Malta** is the centre of **Mediterranean** strategy, their aim being to paralyse the German and Italian traffic to **Africa**, to keep open the sea route from west to east for their ships, and to make possible an attack on **Italy**'. The period of purely Italian direction of sea warfare in the **Mediterranean**, which had been governed by Italian defensive strategy and had resulted in the loss of **Cyrenaica** a second time, came to an end. With the coming of the new year, **Malta** was to face its longest and sternest test. As early as 22 December 1941, when the victorious **Eighth Army** was racing to **Benghazi** and even looking expectantly towards **Tripoli**, heavy German air attacks on the island's airfields were beginning.



THE ISLAND TARGET  
THE ISLAND TARGET





Air Vice-Marshal  
F. H. M. MAYNARD, CB,  
AFC, AIR OFFICER COM-  
MANDING, MALTA, 1940-41

**Air Vice-Marshal F. H. M. MAYNARD, CB, AFC, AIR OFFICER COMMANDING, MALTA, 1940-41**



'FAITH', THE LAST OF MAYNARD'S  
GLADIATORS, IS PRESENTED BY THE  
ROYAL AIR FORCE to the people of  
Malta in September 1943.

**'FAITH', THE LAST OF MAYNARD'S GLADIATORS, IS PRESENTED BY THE ROYAL AIR FORCE  
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***A FLYING-BOATSORTIE***





**ACTION OFF NORTH AFRICA**  
Flight-Lieutenant S. W. R. Hughes (right) was pilot of the Sunderland whose forced-landing on the sea is described on page 8.

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**WRECKED ON THE COAST**  
The whole party swam or were dragged ashore (page 9)



**WRECKED ON THE COAST**

**The whole party swam or were dragged ashore ( [page 9](#) )**



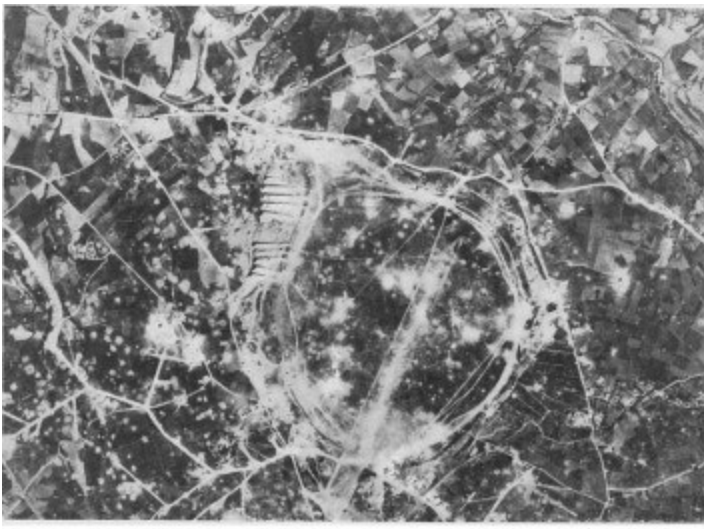
PRISONERS OF WAR Watched by Italian soldiers the British party tend their casualties on the beach (page 9)

**PRISONERS OF WAR Watched by Italian soldiers the British party tend their casualties on the beach ( page 9)**

THE ITALIANS CHANGED THEIR MINDS and followed cheerfully towards Eighth Army's lines (page 10)

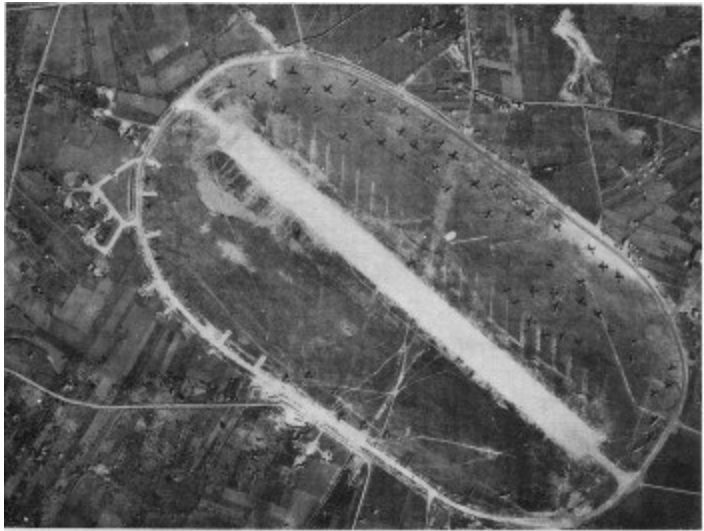


**THE ITALIANS CHANGED THEIR MINDS and followed cheerfully towards Eighth Army's lines ( page 10)**



TA KALI AIRFIELD AND DISPERSAL AREAS, April 1942

**TA KALI AIRFIELD AND DISPERSAL AREAS, April 1942**



AXIS AIRCRAFT AT CASTELVETRANO, SICILY, January 1942

**AXIS AIRCRAFT AT CASTELVETRANO, SICILY, January 1942**



The tattered arming flag over  
the operation Luqa airfield,

**The tattered [ gap — reason: unclear] flag over the [ gap — reason: unclear] at Luqa airfield, [ gap  
— reason: unclear]**



THE GRAND HARBOUR BOMBED, April 1942

**THE GRAND HARBOUR BOMBED, April 1942**



A GENERAL VIEW OF THE GRAND HARBOUR

**A GENERAL VIEW OF THE GRAND HARBOUR**



Refuelling and rearming a Spitfire. This photograph was taken in August 1942

**Refuelling and rearming a Spitfire. This photograph was taken in August 1942**



Scramble

**Scramble**



An Italian Macchi 202 fighter

**An Italian Macchi 202 fighter**

Spitfire pilots eat between sorties. Sergeant J. E. Mortimer is on the right



**Spitfire pilots eat between sorties. Sergeant J. E. Mortimer is on the right**



A Wellington torpedo-bomber being armed

**A Wellington torpedo-bomber being armed**



Rommel's supply ships were the target for torpedo-bombers: a burning tanker splits in two



**Rommel's supply ships were the target for torpedo-bombers: a burning tanker splits in two**



General Eisenhower welcomed to Malta by Air Vice-Marshal Park, August 1943

**General Eisenhower welcomed to [Malta](#) by Air Vice-Marshal Park, August 1943**



A Maltese mother cooks a meal for her family amongst the debris

**A Maltese mother cooks a meal for her family amongst the debris**

\* **The twin-engined Maryland aircraft from the United States were a welcome addition at a time when the whole Middle East Command was suffering from a lack of modern types.**

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# **EPIISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2**

## **SPITFIRES OVER MALTA**

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**THE *Illustrious* blitz by the **Luftwaffe** in January 1941 had been largely opportunist and designed to bolster flagging Italian morale, but the opening months of 1942 brought a definite strategic plan to eliminate **Malta**. By the New Year the sudden renewal of German attacks on **Malta** allowed important supplies to be shipped across to the retreating **Afrika Korps**. The Eighth Army's advance had stopped on the border of **Tripolitania** because of overland supply difficulties, and on 21 January Rommel was able to retaliate with a reconnaissance in strength which developed surprisingly for both sides into a swift and seemingly irresistible advance whose impetus had carried it by July to **El Alamein**. **Malta** faced the most critical period in its struggle for existence. If **Malta** should go, then Axis supplies would pour freely across the **Mediterranean** and the Middle East must fall. Throughout the first half of 1942, **Malta's** small and changing force of fighter pilots, among whom were nineteen New Zealanders, was to contest odds which frequently appeared almost hopeless.**

In the first three weeks of January 950 raiders came to **Malta**, and an average of 150 sorties a week was maintained. At the outset, bad weather saved the island, as winter gales, electric storms, and low cloud limited and impeded enemy attacks. The 15th was the first clear day in February, and Kesselring selected Luqa for a heavy attack by 123 Junkers 88 light bombers, escorted by some fifty Messerschmitt 109 fighters. **Malta's** Hurricane fighters were barely faster than the Junkers 88, and since few were armed with cannon, their .303 ammunition made little impression on the Germans' armour plating. Nor did they match the Messerschmitt 109E fighters in speed or fire power. During February 990 tons of bombs fell on the three airfields and the Grand Harbour, and the vital all-weather runway at Luqa became a variegated pattern of bomb holes filled with clay, limestone, and earth. Wing-Commander J. R. Bloxam, who had completed his tour of reconnaissance operations with No. 69 Squadron, was made Operations Officer at this airfield. Throughout the blitz which followed for seven months he was able to

keep the bomber airfield in action in spite of incessant damage; the location and disarming of unexploded bombs became routine. The airfield defences were steadily built up, and all three Services and the Maltese people laboured at the primary task of building anti-blast aircraft pens. The Army supplied up to 3000 men, and anybody with a few hours to spare from his or her normal job helped. Luqa was kept serviceable, and the vital stream of reinforcement Wellington bombers for **Middle East Command** continued to pass through the airfield by night, even when enemy air attacks were in progress.

At the end of February, when the weather improved, **Malta** possessed twenty-one serviceable Hurricanes. The skirmishing period was over, and the tonnage of Axis bombs increased to 2170 for the month of March. The island's striking force of Wellington bombers virtually ceased to exist after 8 March, and the reinforcement aircraft on passage to the **Middle East** were being consistently damaged and immobilised. The Air Officer Commanding signalled that only Spitfires could hope to avert the loss of the island. On 7 March the first batch of fifteen came through from Gibraltar. His Majesty's Aircraft Carrier *Eagle* brought them as far as the **Malta** approaches, south of **Sardinia**, where the pilots, among whom was Sergeant R. B. Hesselyn,<sup>14</sup> made their first take-off from an aircraft-carrier and flew to the island. The Luftwaffe made determined efforts to obliterate the new reinforcements, and at the end of March only nine Spitfires and five Hurricanes remained serviceable. On 27 March Squadron-Leader D. Kain<sup>15</sup> led in as further reinforcements No. 229 Squadron of Hurricane night fighters from **Port Said**; within a month the squadron was so reduced that it was unable to operate.

The February convoy had failed to get through to the island, but in March a combined operation by all Services, which demanded a feint attack by the land forces in North Africa and strategic bombing by the **Middle East Command** of enemy airfields in Rhodes, **Greece**, and **Crete**, brought three merchant vessels through 'Bomb Alley' from **Alexandria**. But the **Luftwaffe** finally sank all three, and only 807 tons of cargo, including some oil, was salvaged. **Middle East Command** could not afford

another convoy for April. **Malta** was about to be 'Coventrated', announced the Axis radio, but the 186 tons of bombs which fell on that English city hardly compared with the 6728 tons which were dropped on **Malta** during April. This attack was to be a prelude to a sea and air invasion such as that on **Crete**, and glider airfields in **Sicily** were being prepared.

April was the cruellest month. An average of 170 bombers raided **Malta** in three waves each day, and each raid lasted about one hour. To face this the **Royal Air Force** could seldom muster more than ten fighters; on some days the figure was as low as four. The dockyard area, which absorbed approximately half the tonnage of bombs, became a shambles, and the submarine flotilla, which had long been based on **Malta**, was finally forced to leave. Thanks, however, to the rock shelters, no more than 300 civilians were killed in this peak month, and the people were heartened by His Majesty's award of the George Cross to the 'island fortress of **Malta**'.

The fighter pilots on the island appeared to be attempting the impossible. On 1 April Sergeant Hesselyn, of No. 249 Squadron, flew in the afternoon detail. Four Spitfires were patrolling at 1000 feet when a Dornier flying-boat, with heavy fighter escort, was reported by the ground controller to be flying into **Malta** at sea level. The Spitfires made individual diving attacks. Hesselyn overshot the Messerschmitt 109 which he had selected, but intercepted a second fighter as it turned ahead of him. He opened fire with a four-second burst from 50 yards and the Messerschmitt turned on its back and dived into the sea. Elated at his first success Hesselyn circled the crashed aircraft, to be abruptly sobered by two streams of explosive cannon-shell passing his port wing from a further two German fighters. The enemy raiders broke away to the north and Hesselyn pursued them, but having exhausted his ammunition and being about forty miles out to sea he returned to base.

One and a half hours later the Spitfire flight scrambled again. A large force of Stuka dive-bombers was plotted on the ground radar screens. As the Spitfires climbed they were attacked by some twenty

**Messerschmitts 109 and were forced down in broken formation to 1000 feet. Hesselyn, with another pilot, escaped the attentions of the fighters and flew straight after the Stukas through the curtain of anti-aircraft fire. He caught one Stuka \* as it recovered from its dive, at which point it was most vulnerable, and fired a two-second burst with both cannon and machine guns; the Stuka exploded and dived into the sea. The two Spitfire pilots escaped from the German fighter escort and returned to base, but as Hesselyn prepared to land he was attacked by a Messerschmitt 109, which in accordance with the usual enemy practice was lurking above the airfield. Hesselyn promptly retracted the Spitfire's undercarriage, opened the throttle fully, and turned steeply; the Messerschmitt 109, whose tracer fire was passing over the Spitfire's wings, overshot and climbed away. In the whole sortie each of the five pilots had claimed a Stuka. Hesselyn had his most successful day on 21 April, when he was credited with one Stuka and one Messerschmitt destroyed and one Messerschmitt damaged in one sortie, and with one Messerschmitt damaged in another.**

**The beleaguered garrison received new heart on 20 April, when forty-seven Spitfires flew in from the [United States](#) aircraft-carrier *Wasp*. They had been despatched from the carrier by Wing-Commander J. S. McLean, <sup>16</sup> a former Battle of [Britain](#) pilot, who was now spending a tour of duty on board these carriers as they shuttled between Gibraltar and their flying-off position south of [Sardinia](#). Previously many similar Hurricane reinforcements and some Spitfires had been lost, but by carefully reducing the aircraft weight and increasing the petrol tankage, Wing-Commander McLEAN made the new Spitfire arrangements work smoothly and successfully. Within twenty minutes of the Spitfires' landing at Ta Kali, they were dive-bombed by ninety German aircraft. The runway was virtually blotted out, but by first light the next morning determined Army reinforcements working with oil lamps and in the light of burning aircraft and petrol bowsers had cleared and rolled the runway. A total of twenty-seven aircraft was all that could be mustered, and after the day's fighting only seventeen remained serviceable. One of the new pilots from USS *Wasp*, Sergeant J. D. Rae, <sup>17</sup>, was shot down two days**

after his arrival; he returned to flying, although the shrapnel wound in his arm was not properly healed, and was soon to rank among **Malta's** best section leaders, being credited with four and a half aircraft destroyed and eight and a half probably destroyed or damaged.

As April ended the position was desperate. Anti-aircraft ammunition needed to be carefully rationed, while the pilots were showing signs of 'cracking' under the immense strain. Captured German bomber pilots, who had been making three sorties a day, four days a week, were confident that the air battle was over, for they no longer needed fighter protection.

Kesselring believed he had achieved his object. During April **Malta's** striking power had been neutralised and supplies run through to the **Afrika Korps**. The immediate invasion of **Malta** seemed to be unnecessary, and the expensive example of **Crete** was cited as a deterring argument.

General Student, who had commanded the airborne invasion of **Crete**, was informed by **Hitler** that the similar plan for **Malta**, Operation 'Hercules', had been abandoned, since the current success in North Africa, consequent upon the improved supply situation, opened up such bright prospects that **Malta** ceased to have any significance. The proposed force of some 600 Axis transport aircraft was allotted to other fronts. Moreover, the **Malta** operations, like those on **Crete**, had serious effects on the **German Air Force**. Some 400 aircraft were kept actively and heavily engaged over the first five months of 1942, with the resultant wastage of 300 aircraft during April alone and some 500 aircraft over the whole period. The heavy expenditure of bombs and aircraft fuel was detrimental to supplies in North Africa. By the middle of May, therefore, the **Luftwaffe** assault abated, for by now German commitments in all theatres were overtaking German resources: the spring offensive in **Russia** required fighters, while the bombers and torpedo-bombers were needed to attack the Murmansk convoys off North **Russia**. **Malta**, which had once seemed superfluous to Allied strategy,

now appeared so to the Axis.

The island therefore had an essential, if fortuitous, respite. The arrival of a second heavy Spitfire reinforcement on 18 May was the climax of **Malta's** struggle for existence. On this occasion a concerted effort by Army and **Royal Air Force** personnel, who had thoroughly rehearsed their technique of refuelling and rearming, sent the Spitfires into battle within as little as nine minutes of their arrival. A force of thirty-seven Spitfires and thirteen Hurricanes, supplemented by an intense anti-aircraft barrage, rose to meet thirty escorted German bombers. Squadron-Leader K. A. Lawrence <sup>18</sup> led No. 185 Hurricane Squadron with increasing success, while Sergeant R. B. Hesselyn was again among the top-scoring Spitfire pilots, being credited with five enemy aircraft destroyed and one damaged within five days. At long last the **Royal Air Force** in **Malta** fought on equal terms, and for the rest of May German activity continued to lessen, being replaced by increasing but inaccurate Italian night attacks. On the night of 22 May Flight-Lieutenant G. McL. Hayton <sup>19</sup> destroyed one Italian Fiat heavy bomber and probably destroyed another in the same sortie.

The supply situation was still critical, since the passage of the Narrow Seas remained closed except to essential supplies of petrol and torpedoes which came in by submarine. In June a convoy of eleven ships was turned back to **Alexandria** under threat of the **Italian Fleet**, and six merchant ships simultaneously approaching from Gibraltar fell to Axis air attack from **Sicily** and **Sardinia**. The non-arrival of the **Alexandria** convoy was a bitter disappointment since **Malta** had kept up continuous observation of units of the **Italian Fleet** at **Naples**, **Palermo**, and **Taranto**. Flying-Officer H. G. Coldbeck, <sup>20</sup> flying the specially-stripped photographic Spitfires of No. 69 Squadron, whose flight he later commanded, made frequent sorties over the **Taranto** main fleet base, while Squadron-Leader A. H. Harding, <sup>21</sup> of No. 221 Squadron, patrolled in a radar-equipped Wellington outside **Naples** and **Palermo** by night. A force of two battleships, four cruisers, and destroyer escort was detected putting to sea from **Taranto** on 14 June. Beaufort and Wellington



torpedo attacks from **Malta**, supplemented from the **Middle East** by Liberator bombers of the **USAAF**, turned the **Italian Fleet** back, but the **Alexandria** convoy had by then used so much of its anti-aircraft ammunition in defending itself south of **Crete**, that in spite of the fact that the way was clear it was ordered to return to **Alexandria**.

As July opened **Malta** took stock. The Royal Air Force on the island possessed ninety Spitfires, with a total of 4000 men to fly and service them as well as to operate the changing anti-shipping forces of Wellingtons, Marylands, Baltimores, Beaufighters, and Beauforts and the stream of reinforcement aircraft passing through to the **Middle East**. The capture of **Malta** was again considered by the Germans, and the air fighting flared up, but the enemy raids, although continuous, were on a smaller scale than those of the spring and their losses were heavier. In the first two weeks of July, the **Royal Air Force** claimed 102 enemy aircraft destroyed for the loss of twenty-five Spitfire pilots. Pilot-Officer G. Stenborg <sup>22</sup> was credited with two Messerschmitts destroyed in each of two sorties. When the **Luftwaffe** significantly abandoned dive-bombing in favour of safer high-level bombing from 16,000 feet, it was clear that, after six long months, the victory had gone to **Malta's** fighter pilots.

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\* The Stuka pilots made near-vertical dives from 15,000 feet and released their bombs at 5000 feet. As a pilot pressed the bomb-release, an automatic device took control of the aircraft to pull it abruptly out of its dive, for this manoeuvre was usually so violent that both pilot and rear-gunner blacked out; at this point the Stuka became momentarily defenceless.

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# **EPIISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2**

## **THE TORPEDO-BOMBERS ATTACK**

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**NOW** that **Malta** had been held for a second time in the face of the **Luftwaffe** blitz, the island could again adopt its essential role of attacking the Axis shipping lanes to North **Africa**. On 15 July 1942, Air Vice-Marshal Lloyd, successor to Air Vice-Marshal Maynard, handed over to Air Vice-Marshal K. R. Park.<sup>23</sup> Air Vice-Marshal Park's principal war experience had been in directing fighter operations, and he was to change drastically the functions of **Malta**'s fighter force. But **Malta**'s first duty was to sink merchant ships, and under Park's command this air offensive was launched and grew steadily until it surprised even the most hopeful observers.

The most significant tactical feature of the operations which now began, and which were a necessary prelude to the **El Alamein** land offensive, was the development of a long-range torpedo-bomber, for the **Royal Navy** had demonstrated that there was no more effective weapon for attacking merchant vessels than the torpedo. Beaufort aircraft, supplemented by light naval forces and particularly submarines, could be expected to close the shipping lanes by day, but the enemy convoys could still slip across under cover of darkness. The problem appeared insoluble, but the answer came from the ingenious airmen on the spot. The twin-engined Wellington bomber, now being out-moded in the **United Kingdom**, was still the mainstay of the Middle East night-bomber force. Trials were therefore begun over the **Red Sea** to modify this aircraft into a torpedo-bomber, and the **Air Ministry** was finally convinced that these aircraft could form a highly efficient striking force. The Wellington, slow, unweildy, and fabric-covered as it was, would be too vulnerable a target by day, but possessed the necessary long range for night operations. Throughout the early months of 1942, pilots, among whom were Squadron-Leader M. J. Earle<sup>24</sup> and Flight-Sergeant A. G. Metcalf,<sup>25</sup> flew tirelessly over the **Red Sea** formulating tactics, and a new and interesting series of operations ensued.

**Radar-equipped Wellingtons, loaded with parachute flares, patrolled**

the shipping lanes for up to ten hours throughout the night. Sighting reports were sent to base, and a striking force of torpedo-Wellingtons was homed on to the target convoy by continual position signals and by direction-finding radio. The search-Wellingtons, popularly known as 'Snoopingtons', promptly dropped parachute flares in an L-shaped pattern around the convoy from 4000 feet, utilising any moon path on the sea as well, so that the whole convoy might be trapped in a rectangle of light and the dispositions of the escorting destroyers clearly picked out. Meanwhile the strike-Wellingtons, or 'Torpingtons', attacked at sea level, making their runs so that the enemy merchant vessels were silhouetted against the flares. The torpedoes had to be dropped at approximately seventy feet above sea level, and on dark nights pilots sometimes flew into the sea. Radio-altimeters and some curious forms of torpedo-sights were later refinements, but pilots generally relied on their own judgment.

The night offensive on shipping exceeded all expectations. In the first two squadrons, Nos. 38 and 221, there were twenty New Zealanders during this period; the latter squadron had been quickly switched from the very different climate of **Iceland** to reinforce the new offensive. The aircrews were encouraged by vivid posters displayed in the Operations Rooms, which pointed out that the sinking of two 6000-ton transports and one 3000-ton oil-tanker disposed of more than forty tanks, 130 guns, 5000 tons of ammunition, 1000 bowsers full of petrol, with innumerable spares, the sum of which, if once off-loaded and dispersed in the desert, could not be destroyed by fewer than 3000 bomber sorties. With glittering targets such as these, the coastal aircraft kept up an intensive attack. The cumulative effect of the shipping losses on the land battle was very great, for at El Alamein Rommel was struggling with the perennial **Mediterranean** problem of extended lines of communication. By the middle of 1942 the Axis front line had stabilised at **Alamein** and enemy shipping was using **Tobruk**.

The squadrons were accordingly based in Egypt and used **Malta** as an advanced base. Pilot- Officer J. S. Frame, <sup>26</sup> of No. 221 Squadron,

specialised in search work, and on 31 October when operating from Gianaclis he made a dusk reconnaissance off the coast between **Derna** and **Tobruk**. He located a convoy of three merchant vessels and escorts, and was responsible for keeping it under surveillance until later Wellingtons took over and the striking force succeeded in completely destroying it. The search aircraft in many ways had the more difficult task; enemy ground stations learned to interfere with the Wellington's radar, while enemy escort vessels soon knew from which direction and at what height the torpedo aircraft must attack, and shielded their merchant vessels accordingly.

On the night of 17 September a sighting report was received at 10 p.m. of three merchant vessels and twelve destroyers north-west of **Tobruk**. No. 38 Squadron sent a striking force of four aircraft, each carrying two 1000-lb. bombs, and six aircraft each with two torpedoes. At ten minutes to eleven Flight-Sergeant T. D. Rusbach <sup>27</sup> made his attack, releasing both torpedoes on the same run against a 4000-ton merchant vessel. He was subjected to intense anti-aircraft fire from that ship, and being busy with evasive action saw no results. Sergeant A. G. Metcalf was one of the last to attack; he selected a 3000-ton merchant vessel and saw two explosions. Again there was intense fire and the aircraft was punished severely. The wireless equipment became inoperative, the main fuse box being blown off. The navigator was wounded in the leg, and Flight-Sergeant J. D. C. Cumming, <sup>28</sup> the wireless operator, received severe flesh wounds in both arms and a thigh. The Wellington, however, continued to fly, and when Metcalf had set course for base he dressed Cumming's wounds. The latter was able to make temporary repairs to the wireless, and having sent out an SOS signal, he assisted the wounded observer to navigate back to base. Once they had got over the airfield it was discovered that one wing was damaged and only one undercarriage wheel could be lowered, but a safe landing was made.

As the **Afrika Korps** retired westward from **Alamein**, the Wellington squadrons continued to enforce their blockade of the North African

coast by moving completely to **Malta**, and they scored increased successes. Among the search pilots Squadron-Leader A. H. Harding was particularly prominent for his skilful illumination of shipping targets. Flight-Sergeant W. Hornung <sup>29</sup> attacked an enemy merchant vessel of 4000 tons, escorted by a destroyer, which he found illuminated off the north coast of **Sicily**. Hornung dropped one torpedo at 1000 yards range and his second at 800 yards range, in spite of a barrage of light anti-aircraft fire from both ships during the attack and his break-away. At least one torpedo struck the merchant vessel, which immediately burst into flames and eventually split in two. Sergeant W. A. Fraser <sup>30</sup> had an exceptional fortnight. On the night of 2 February 1943 two search aircraft picked up a 6000-ton tanker in a convoy off the south-east coast of **Italy**. Fraser captained a strike aircraft despatched to the rendezvous, but the illuminating aircraft had only one flare left for his attack. Because of the position of this flare, Fraser had to make a difficult head-on attack in order to silhouette the tanker and to avoid the two escorting destroyers. He released his first torpedo at a range of 700 yards and got away before either destroyer could fire a shot. The tanker caught fire and was beached, as it was then only one mile off shore. Five days later Fraser shared in seriously damaging a 6000-ton merchant vessel. On 15 February he attacked a second tanker of 5000 tons, escorted by two destroyers, in the face of intense light anti-aircraft fire which damaged the Wellington and wounded the rear gunner. Fraser's torpedo struck the tanker amidships, and the remaining five aircraft of the striking force watched it burst into flames.

In conjunction with the Wellington night attacks, the daylight strikes by Beaufort torpedo-bombers from **Malta** were proving equally successful and eventful. But losses were high, and the Beaufort aircraft soon acquired the same unenviable reputation as the Blenheims had enjoyed in the previous year. Pilot-Officer J. H. Low <sup>31</sup> flew twenty-three sorties as wireless operator-air gunner from **Malta** during his tour of duty, a total of 125 operational hours. A flight of his squadron was despatched against a convoy of four merchant vessels and eleven destroyers, escorted by Italian fighters. Three Macchi fighters attacked

his Beaufort during its final run-in to release the torpedo, but Low's fire-control orders from his vantage point in the mid-upper turret enabled the attacks to be beaten off, and the torpedo hit a merchant vessel.

Out of these gallant Beaufort attacks came a unique event in the air war in which two New Zealand wireless operator-gunners took full share. On 29 July 1942 Sergeants A. R. Brown <sup>32</sup> and J. A. Wilkinson <sup>33</sup> flew with their South African pilot and English navigator in an attack on one merchant vessel and two destroyers off Sapienza in Southern Greece. The pilot, Lieutenant E. T. Strever, fired his torpedoes at short range at the merchant vessel, since that was invariably the prime target, but his aircraft was badly hit in the starboard engine, which eventually failed, forcing him to land in the sea. Although the Beaufort sank within ninety seconds, the crew were able to climb into their dinghy and paddle towards the coast. Presently an Italian Cant Z506 float-plane alighted about 100 yards away. The South African lieutenant swam over to it, and was courteously received with brandy and cigarettes as he explained in pantomime what had happened. The rest of the crew were taken aboard, and the three-engined float-plane taxied laboriously to a nearby island. Here they were given the use of the officers' mess for the rest of the day and were treated to an excellent dinner and a lively party in the evening. In the morning photographs were taken and the Cant set course for **Taranto**. The crew consisted of first and second pilot, engineer, and wireless operator-observer, the escort being one Italian corporal carrying a revolver. Shortly before the flight began our men had discussed the possibility of capturing the aircraft. Sergeant Wilkinson was the first to see an opportunity. He was sitting facing the Italian observer, behind whom sat the escort with his revolver at his waist. Attracting the observer's attention, he hit him heavily on the jaw, jumped over him and seized the astonished escort's revolver. Passing this to Lieutenant Strever, Wilkinson moved toward the Italian pilot using the Corporal as a shield. Strever followed behind Wilkinson, brandishing the revolver at the pilot, who attempted to draw his own and to put the aircraft down on the water. Threatened again by the Lieutenant, he levelled out the aircraft and submitted to capture.

Meanwhile the English observer and Sergeant Brown trussed up the remaining Italians, and the South African took over the controls.

But the crew was now faced with the difficulty of flying a strange three-engined aircraft, besides being without maps or charts and having little knowledge of their geographical position. The Italian second-pilot was put in the pilot's seat and a rough course set for **Malta**. At length they recognised the toe of **Italy**, and although there was no way of gauging the amount of petrol left, they determined to try again for **Malta**. Finally the island was sighted, but the worst moment of the whole sortie came when three Spitfires attacked as the Cant flew in at sea level. Brown spun the guns about as the recognised signal to show the fighters that he was not going to fire, and the navigator waved his white singlet out of the cockpit, but the Spitfires still attacked, and when one of the wings was hit by cannon and machine-gun fire, the Italian second-pilot was ordered to come down on the sea. As the aircraft touched down the engines stopped for lack of petrol. Subsequently the party was towed into **Malta**, where the Cant aircraft was put to good use on air-sea rescue duties. The South African lieutenant felt in honour bound to supervise personally the Italians' comfort as the least return for their hospitality. The captured crew cheerfully accepted the situation, although they had in fact been proceeding on leave to the mainland, and one even produced from his suitcase a bottle of wine. It was with mixed feelings that the Royal **Air Force** crew later heard a Spitfire pilot claim in the Mess to have shot down an enemy float- plane.

But this was merely light relief to the unceasing attack which **Malta's** torpedo-bombers maintained by night and day. The resultant failure of the Italian Merchant Navy to deliver essential war material and petrol to the **Afrika Korps** brought bitter reproaches from the German High Command. In the critical seven months after Rommel's arrival at **El Alamein**, 495,000 tons of enemy shipping was sunk, nearly two-thirds of it by air attack. This meant that the Eighth Army could move forward from **Alamein** confident in its superiority of supply, for **Malta's** blockade of the North African coastline was practically complete.





# EPIISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## OVER TO THE OFFENSIVE

## OVER TO THE OFFENSIVE

**THE CONTINUED** success of **Malta's** attack on enemy shipping depended always on the freedom of the island's airfields from enemy air attack. When Air Vice-Marshal Park came to **Malta** in July 1942, the Spitfires' superiority had still to be finally established, as the **Luftwaffe** continued to make three raids a day. Park was thoroughly experienced in leading an aggressive fighter defence: he had directed the most active Fighter Group in the Battle of **Britain**, and during the last six months had commanded Air Headquarters, Egypt, and had been responsible for the air defence of Egypt and the Suez Canal Zone.

When Air Vice-Marshal Park took over, the island's petrol and food supplies were still critical, and its eleven squadrons, which included five fighter squadrons, were tired after the long blitz they had sustained. But a total of ninety Spitfires represented comparative strength, and some battle-weary personnel could be relieved. Park quickly changed the defensive tactics of this fighter force. A Special Order of the Day announced his new policy of forward interception: aided by improved radio-location methods, the Spitfire squadrons swept northwards to break up the enemy formations before they could approach **Malta's** dockyards or airfields, and inflicted such heavy casualties that in two weeks the enemy day raids were stopped. The passage of the August convoy from Gibraltar was bitterly contested by a concentration of 650 Axis aircraft in **Sicily** and **Sardinia**. Only five of the original fourteen merchant vessels were finally unloaded in **Malta** and the aircraft-carrier *Eagle*, an old and trusted friend of **Malta**, was sunk, but the battered American tanker *Ohio* limped into the Grand Harbour under Spitfire cover and ten weeks' fuel was added to the island's four weeks' stock.

The last blitz on **Malta** took place in October 1942. In North Africa the British offensive at **Alamein** was about to open. The Luftwaffe made a final attempt to neutralise **Malta** and its harbour, for the offensive on Axis shipping lanes was proving too successful. On 11 October there was a raid by fifty-eight escorted bombers, but Park's Battle of **Britain** tactics

of forward interception held good, and the Spitfires achieved extraordinary success.

Sergeant J. F. P. Yeatman,<sup>34</sup> who had volunteered for service in **Malta** from No. 485 New Zealand Squadron in the **United Kingdom**, had a narrow escape. He attacked a Messerschmitt 109 fighter which was straggling behind its parent formation of some twenty others. His combat report continues:

I considered they had not seen me, so dived on the straggler, opened fire from 200-250 yards and observed strikes on the starboard wing. The Messerschmitt turned on its back and dived down in the direction of **Sicily**. I turned on my back also and followed it down, overtaking it at sea level, roughly 20 miles from **Malta**. I closed right up to 50 yards and gave one five-second burst, observing further strikes. At that moment I was attacked by two other Me109s and forced to break away steeply to the right. Whenever I was able, I made sharp dashes for **Malta**, but the Messerschmitts then started attacking one on each side so that they could get a shot whichever way I broke. I closed the throttle and both overshot. I then turned at right angles toward **Malta** and did not see them again until I observed cannon fire hitting the sea ahead, on the right-hand side. I broke left and was hit twice. Two Spitfires appeared and the Me109s veered off. I climbed to 500 feet, and one Spitfire orbited above me. I returned to base and landed. I claim one Me109 damaged.

Sergeant N. M. Park<sup>35</sup> on 12 October flew in a dawn patrol of three Spitfires of No. 126 Squadron which made a head-on attack on a formation of seven Junkers 88 bombers. He shot down one and, despite the efforts of escorting German and Italian fighters, turned and destroyed a second. On the midday patrol he claimed another bomber as damaged. In a similar patrol two days later, Sergeant Park probably destroyed one Messerschmitt fighter and damaged one Junkers 88, while Sergeant R. B. Hendry<sup>36</sup> claimed one fighter destroyed. In the afternoon sortie Park reported:

We were patrolling at 21,000 feet, 20 miles north-east of Grand Harbour,

when we sighted nine Junkers 88 with a swarm of fighters heading south. We turned into the attack, Red 1 and myself going into the bombers. I got on one bomber's tail, but my guns had frozen so I broke away, and after shaking off two attacking Messerschmitts 109, I dived away down to 10,000 feet. On hearing the Ground Controller broadcast the height and position of the bombers, I went east to Kalafrana Bay, where the bombers were seen heading back to the north-east. I tried to intercept them, but was jumped by two Me109s. I turned quickly to avoid, and after a complete turn got on a Messerschmitt's tail. I closed in without opening fire to about 100 yards, when he changed his turn and I gave him a three-second burst from dead astern. He went into a steep dive straight into the sea. I circled the spot but there was no sign of the pilot. I claim one Messerschmitt 109 destroyed.

Sergeant Park's total over this short period of intensive fighting was three Junkers 88 and two Messerschmitts 109 destroyed and one Junkers 88 probably destroyed—by the end of the month his score at **Malta** was assessed as eight enemy aircraft destroyed and two damaged after four months' operations. After the first hectic ten days the last concerted **Luftwaffe** blitz died away; the five Spitfire squadrons claimed 132 enemy aircraft destroyed in the course of the month—a major loss to the fighting strength of the **Luftwaffe** in the **Mediterranean**. The November convoy from Egypt came through intact. The siege of **Malta** was finally raised, and the populace gathered to watch and cheer the long line of ships that queued outside the Grand Harbour.

By November, therefore, Air Vice-Marshal Sir Keith Park \* could use his aircraft more freely in giving tactical assistance to the **Mediterranean** land campaigns. By the beginning of the month enemy reconnaissance had ascertained that a considerable Allied seaborne operation was intended in the Western Mediterranean. Naval and air concentrations at Gibraltar could hardly be concealed from the Spanish border. Accordingly the **Luftwaffe**'s torpedo-bomber force in **Sicily** and **Sardinia** was again hastily strengthened by units from **Norway**, **Greece**, and **Crete**, since the German Intelligence believed that the vast Allied

convoys were meant to force the passage of the **Mediterranean** and reinforce the **Eighth Army** in Egypt. Every night in November, except on four when the weather was bad, Air Vice-Marshal Park despatched Wellington bombers from Luqa to bomb the massed enemy aircraft at Cagliari on the southern tip of **Sardinia**. And, in the event, Operation 'Torch', the invasion of North- **West Africa** under General Eisenhower, suffered only inconsiderable shipping losses.

During this month, therefore, the Allied forces in the **Mediterranean** theatre had abruptly swung over to the attack, with the **United States** and British Armies from the west and the Eighth Army from the east converging for the final clearance of North Africa. When it was clear that the Axis was determined to defend **Tunisia**, it became **Malta's** part, as well as sustaining its anti- shipping offensive, to reduce Axis air power in the Central Mediterranean, and especially to disrupt the aerial reinforcement of **Tunisia** by the **Luftwaffe** which was having serious effects on the campaign. Air Vice-Marshal Park switched his Wellington night-bomber force to attack El Aouina aerodrome outside **Tunis**, where many aircraft of all types were destroyed on the ground, and his Beaufighters added to the devastation. The Spitfire squadrons for their part attacked the airfields in **Sicily** and **Italy**. For the first time these aircraft were modified in the field and used as fighter-bombers. By drawing upon local ingenuity, two 250-lb. bombs were fitted under the wings.

Sergeant J. A. Houlton, <sup>37</sup> of No. 185 Squadron, flew in a section of four Spitbombers with fighter escort which bombed Gela airfield in **Sicily**. Returning to Hal Far airfield at 7000 feet, he sighted a formation of eight Junkers 52 transports flying west from **Sicily** at 1000 feet above the sea. He attacked three of the aircraft in turn. The first held its formation, but the second was definitely hit and turned back toward Gela; the troops being carried in the third aircraft put up a barrage of small-arms fire from the windows, but Houlton saw his own machine-gun fire register hits around the pilot's cockpit, and when last seen the Junkers 52 was losing height and very close to the sea. He claimed the

last two aircraft as damaged.

Three New Zealand pilots scored an unusual success on 14 November. Five Spitfires of No. 126 Squadron were despatched to sweep the **Sicily- Tunis** channel. North of **Cape Bon**, Sergeant R. B. Hendry and Pilot-Officer D. A. Piggott <sup>38</sup> caught an Italian Fiat BR20 bomber at sea level and made a simultaneous attack; white smoke came from both engines, and the aircraft immediately plunged into the sea, where it exploded in a sheet of flame. Fifteen minutes later the formation intercepted an aerial train of some thirty-five transports, flying at sea level and escorted by long-range German fighters. Sergeant J. E. Mortimer <sup>39</sup> was engaged by one of the Messerschmitt 110 fighters, but he eventually drove it off with black smoke pouring from its starboard engine. Hendry saw a large four-engined Junkers 90 detach itself from the main body of the transports and climb slowly toward the safety of cloud cover; he overtook it and was able to fire a burst just as it disappeared. Climbing through the ceiling of cloud, Hendry picked out the ponderous shape of the Junkers 90 passing below him through breaks in the cloud. He used all his cannon shells against it, scoring strikes on the starboard wing, which began to trail black smoke, and he last saw it steadily losing height. Among them the three pilots claimed one enemy aircraft destroyed and two damaged.

Hence, as the vital year of 1942 closed, **Malta** had swung wholeheartedly to the offensive. The future was bright. New and long-range aircraft, Beaufighters and Mosquitoes, were soon adding to the weight of the island's striking power. Malta Air Command was created, and Air Vice-Marshal Park, who remained in command for the whole of 1943, made full use of the island's unique geographical position to assist each **Mediterranean** land campaign in turn. The lean years were over, and in place of the poverty which had faced Air Vice-Marshal Maynard in his resolve to defend the island, **Malta's** air power was to increase until, when the island base prepared for the invasion of **Sicily**, there was almost an embarrassment of riches as a force of more than thirty squadrons assembled. But the foundations of this success were laid in

**the siege, unexampled in modern warfare, which the island had sustained for two and a half years. Among the airmen who fought and shared in [Malta](#)'s lonely ordeal, the small band of eighty-four New Zealanders made their mark. Air Vice-Marshal Maynard, the first Air Officer Commanding, was one of the few to perceive that in the new war of movement and supply [Malta](#) was the key to the [Mediterranean](#), and Air Vice-Marshal Park had later effectively demonstrated the truth of this. The aircrews who broke up the Axis air raids, sank Axis supply ships, and ranged over the encircling enemy coastlines, knew how much depended on them, and felt it was no small honour to be at this time in [Malta](#).**

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**\* Air Vice-Marshal Park was knighted in recognition of his command at [Malta](#), being created KBE on 27 Nov 1942.**

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# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

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**THE AUTHOR, J. A. Whelan, graduated Master of Arts with Honours from Auckland University College, served as a pilot with the Royal New Zealand Air Force in the United Kingdom and the Mediterranean, and graduated Bachelor of Arts with Honours in Modern History from Cambridge University.**

# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

### *BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES*

<sup>1</sup>Air Vice-Marshal F. H. M. MAYNARD, CB, AFC, Legion of Merit (US); RAF (retd.); England; born **Waiuku**, 1 May 1893; joined **Royal Naval Air Service** in 1915 and served in **France** and **United Kingdom** in First World War in RNAS and **RAF**; AOC RAF, **Mediterranean**, 26 Jan 1940-1 Jun 1941; Air Officer in Charge of Administration, RAF Coastal Command, 1941-44; AOC No. 19 Group, **Coastal Command**, 1944-45.

<sup>2</sup>Squadron-Leader R. J. HYDE, AFC, m.i.d.; **Christchurch**; born **Christchurch**, 21 Dec 1912; joined **RAF** 1938.

<sup>3</sup>Air Marshal Sir HUGH, LLOYD, KBE, CB, MC, DFC, Legion of Merit (US); AOC RAF, **Mediterranean**, 1 Jun 1941-15 Jul 1942; C-in-C, Air Command, **Far East**, 1948-49; AOC-in-C, RAF Bomber Command, 1950.

<sup>4</sup>Squadron-Leader D. N. MILLIGAN, DFC; born **Wellington**, 19 Dec 1916; clerk; joined **RAF** 1937; killed on active service 18 Jan 1944.

<sup>5</sup>Flight-Lieutenant H. L. M. GLOVER; British Overseas Airways Corporation; born Dunedin; joined **RAF** 1930; Empire Division, Imperial Airways, 1937-40; joined BOAC from **RAF**, 1942.

<sup>6</sup>Wing-Commander A. FRAME, DFC; **RAF**; **London**; born **Oamaru**, 6 Sep 1916; clerk; joined **RAF** 1938; Flight Commander 490 (NZ) Sqn, **West Africa**, 1943.

<sup>7</sup>Squadron-Leader H. W. LAMOND, DFC (Greek); British Air Forces of Occupation, **Germany**; born **Auckland**, 26 Aug 1915; joined **RAF** 1939; missing on air operations 25 Apr 1941 and later taken prisoner of war.

<sup>8</sup>Wing-Commander S. W. R. HUGHES, OBE, AFC, DFC (Greek); **RAF**; England; born **Auckland**, 25 Oct 1914; journalist; joined **RNZAF** 1937

and transferred to **RAF** 1938.

<sup>9</sup>Flight-Lieutenant G. H. **EASTON**; **BOAC**; England; born **Christchurch**, 7 Nov 1921; joined **RNZAF**1940.

<sup>10</sup>Wing-Commander J. R. **BLOXAM**, OBE, DFC; **RAF**; England; born **New Plymouth**, 20 Mar 1918; bank clerk; joined **RAF**1938.

<sup>11</sup>Squadron-Leader J. **BUCKLEY**, DFC; **London**; born **Wanganui**, 29 Nov 1915; music student; joined **RAF**1940.

<sup>12</sup>Squadron-Leader V. **ALLPORT**, DFC; born **Nelson**, 18 Feb 1916; life assurance agent; joined **RNZAF**1940; killed on active service 26 Mar 1944.

<sup>13</sup>Flight-Lieutenant E. G. **EDMUNDS**, DFC; born **Wellington**, 29 Nov 1915; joined **RNZAF**1940; killed in action 11 Dec 1941.

<sup>14</sup>Flight-Lieutenant R. B. **HESSELYN**, MBE, DFC, DFM and bar; **RAF**; England; born **Dunedin**, 13 Mar 1921; joined **RNZAF**1940; prisoner of war, 3 Oct 1943-15 May 1945; twice wounded.

<sup>15</sup>Wing-Commander D. **KAIN**; **Raglan**; born **Wanganui**, 16 Oct 1915; farmer; joined **RAF**1935.

<sup>16</sup>Wing-Commander J. S. **MCLEAN**, OBE, DFC; **RAF**; England; born **Hawera**, 19 Feb 1912; joined **RAF**1932.

<sup>17</sup>Flight-Lieutenant J. D. **RAE**, DFC and bar; **Auckland**; born **Auckland**, 15 Jan 1919; clerk; joined **RNZAF**1940; prisoner of war, 22 Aug 1943-28 Apr 1945; wounded 1 May 1942.

<sup>18</sup>Squadron-Leader K. A. **LAWRENCE**, DFC; **RNZAF Station**, **Wigram**; born **Waitara**, 25 Nov 1919; bank clerk; joined **RAF**1939.

<sup>19</sup>Flight-Lieutenant G. Mc L. **HAYTON**, DFC; born **Hawera**, 12 May 1917; accountant; joined **RAF**1939; killed by enemy action at sea, 20 Oct 1942.

<sup>20</sup>Flight-Lieutenant H. G. COLDBECK, DFC; **Christchurch**; born **Christchurch**, 27 Nov 1916; house decorator; joined **RNZAF**1941; prisoner of war, 10 Nov 1942.

<sup>21</sup>Wing-Commander A. H. HARDING, DFC; RNZAF Station, **Wigram**; born **Wellington**, 1 Sep 1918; civil servant; joined **RAF**1938; commanded 2 Sqn, No. 5 Coastal OTU, Apr-Dec 1943, and 353 Transport Sqn, **RAF** India, Mar-Oct 1945.

<sup>22</sup>Flight-Lieutenant G. STENBORG, DFC; born **Auckland**, 13 Oct 1921; clerk; joined **RNZAF**1940; killed in action 24 Sep 1943.

<sup>23</sup>Air Chief Marshal Sir KEITH R. PARK, GCB, KBE, MC and bar, DFC, Croix de Guerre; **RAF** (retd.); **Auckland**; born **Thames**, 15 Jun 1892; in First World War served in Egypt, **Gallipoli**, and **France** in NZ Field Artillery (1914-15) and Royal Field Artillery (1915-16); wounded **Somme**, Oct 1916; seconded to Royal Flying Corps Jan 1917; permanent commission **RAF**, 1919; Senior Air Staff Officer, HQ Fighter Command, 1938- 40; AOC No. 11 Group, Fighter Command, Apr-Dec 1940; AOC Air Headquarters, Egypt, Jan-Jul 1942; AOC **RAF**, **Mediterranean** and Malta Air Command, 15 Jul 1942-Dec 1943; AOC-in-C, **Middle East**, Jan-Dec 1944; Allied Air C-in-C, South-East Asia, Feb 1945-May 1946.

<sup>24</sup>Wing-Commander M. J. EARLE; born **Wanganui**, 2 Oct 1915; joined **RAF**1936.

<sup>25</sup>Flying-Officer A. G. METCALF, DFM; born Bradford, England, 5 Jun 1919; farmer; joined **RNZAF**1940; killed in action 28 Dec 1943.

<sup>26</sup>Flight-Lieutenant J. S. FRAME, DFC; **Wanganui**; born **Mosgiel**, 26 Jul 1916; clerk; joined **RNZAF**1941.

<sup>27</sup>Warrant-Officer T. D. RUSBATCH; **Oamaru**; born **Oamaru**, 19 Dec 1918; mechanic; joined **RNZAF**1940.

<sup>28</sup>Flying-Officer J. D. C. CUMMING, DFM; **Palmerston North**; born **Christchurch**, 2 Jun 1917; clerk; joined **RNZAF**1938; wounded 17 Sep

1942.

<sup>29</sup>Flight-Sergeant W. HORNUNG, DFM; born **Christchurch**, 12 Sep 1918; clerk; joined **RNZAF**1940; killed in action 10 Apr 1943.

<sup>30</sup>Flight-Lieutenant W. A. FRASER, DFC, DFM; **Auckland**; born Dunedin, 8 Dec 1921; farmer; joined **RNZAF**1941.

<sup>31</sup>Flying-Officer J. H. Low, DFC; born Bluff, 6 Apr 1918; railway porter; joined **RNZAF**1940; accidentally killed in NZ, 23 Mar 1944.

<sup>32</sup>Warrant-Officer A. R. BROWN, DFM; **Timaru**; born **Timaru**, 5 Sep 1915; labourer; joined **RNZAF**1940.

<sup>33</sup>Flight-Lieutenant J. A. WILKINSON, DFM; Pukekawa, **Auckland**; born **Gisborne**, 8 Nov 1919; sheep-farmer; joined **RNZAF**1940.

<sup>34</sup>Flight-Lieutenant J. F. P. YEATMAN, DFC; **Wellington**; born Brighton, England, 17 Feb 1919; clerk; joined **RNZAF**1941.

<sup>35</sup>Pilot-Officer N. M. PARK, DFM; born **Gisborne**, 6 Mar 1921; shepherd; joined **RNZAF**1941; killed in action 25 Oct 1942.

<sup>36</sup>Flight-Lieutenant R. B. HENDRY, DFC; **Masterton**; born **Masterton**, 2 Aug 1920; clerk; joined **RNZAF**1941.

<sup>37</sup>Flight-Lieutenant J. A. HOULTON, DFC; **Woodend**; born **Christchurch**, 23 Sep 1922; clerk; joined **RNZAF**1941.

<sup>38</sup>Flight-Lieutenant D. A. PIGGOTT; **Auckland**; born **Auckland**, 31 May 1921; engineer; joined **RNZAF**1941.

<sup>39</sup>Flight-Lieutenant J. E. MORTIMER, DFC; **Auckland**; born **Auckland**, 12 Jul 1916; warehouseman; joined **RNZAF**1941; shot down over **Somme** estuary, 3 Oct 1943, escaped to **France** and evaded capture for eleven months; wounded 15 Oct 1942.

The rank given is the highest attained by each airman during his wartime service and the occupations are those engaged in on

**enlistment.**

# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

### *ACKNOWLEDGMENTS*

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*J. R. Bloxam* Cover, **page 17 ( bottom, page 19 ( bottom)**

*F. H. M. Maynard* **page 13, ( bottom left)**

*S. W. R. Hughes* **page 14**

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## TAKROUNA

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NEW ZEALAND IN THE SECOND WORLD WAR  
1941-1945



### TAKROUNA

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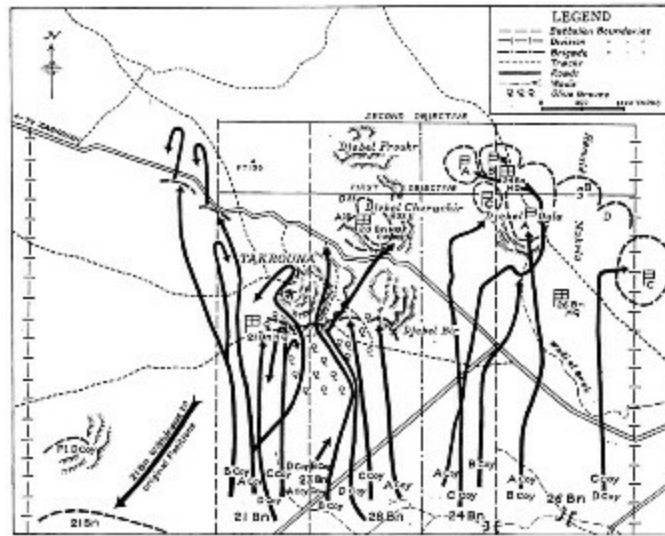
### TAKROUNA

by  
I. McL. WARDS

WAR HISTORY SOCIETY  
DEPARTMENT OF INTERNAL AFFAIRS  
PO BOX 107, WELLINGTON  
1991

# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## [FRONTISPIECE]



**Diagram showing company positions and lines of advance**

**COVER PHOTOGRAPH The South-east face of Takrouna**

**EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2**

**[TITLE PAGE]**

**TAKROUNA**

**I. McL. WARDS**

**WAR HISTORY BRANCH**

**DEPARTMENT OF INTERNAL AFFAIRS WELLINGTON, NEW ZEALAND**

**1951**

# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

[EDITORPAGE]

**THE BATTLE OF ENFIDAVILLE** *was the last major operation in which 2 NZ Division was engaged in **Africa**, and the struggle for **Takrouna** was the most severe phase of that battle. It came at the end of a severe ten months' campaign, when the Division was at the peak of its efficiency as a fighting machine but signs of strain were beginning to appear. None of the troops engaged had taken part in fewer than two battles, **Medenine** and **Tebaga Gap**, and the great majority in many more.*

*The responsibilities of leaders at all grades were consequently greatly increased, and this account shows how they were discharged. There were few actions in which junior commanders, down to privates commanding sections, were required and able to play such important and decisive parts. There was more manoeuvre in this action than usually occurs in a set-piece affair and some interesting examples of the use of reserves and of artillery.*

*The services of New Zealand troops in **Africa** will be related in part of a volume dealing with the events of 1939–41, including the Greece Campaign, and in three volumes dealing respectively with **Libya** 1941, **Egypt** 1942, and **Egypt to Tunisia** 1942–43. Substantial progress has been made with each of these, but printing difficulties make it impossible to predict the date of publication.*

*This is the 18th of a series of 24 detailed accounts of episodes characteristic of the fighting in the three Services during the Second World War and studies of certain aspects of New Zealand's war experience. It is intended to be supplementary to the campaign volumes.*

*Binding cases for this series can be obtained from booksellers.*

**H. K. KIPPENBERGER**

,

***Major-General***

**EDITOR-IN-CHIEF**

**NEW ZEALAND WAR HISTORIES**

# EPIISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

[CHAPTER]

*'L'homme est l'instrument premier du combat.'*

( Ardant du Picq)

ON 14 April 1943 **Eighth Army** had been halted on the narrow coastal plain to the south of **Enfidaville** after an unbroken advance from **Wadi Akarit**. Following an unsuccessful attempt to 'bump' the enemy from positions in broken, mountainous country beyond the town, the Army had paused to take stock of the situation, to re-deploy, and to prepare for attack. General Montgomery was informed that the British First Army and **2 United States Corps** (which with **Eighth Army** constituted **18 Army Group** under General Alexander) would undertake a major offensive farther north with the intention of capturing **Tunis** and compelling the final surrender of the enemy in **Africa**. **Eighth Army** was to exert the maximum pressure on the sector in the south to pin enemy forces there, and on 20 April, two days before the offensive in the north, was to deliver an attack with the double object of drawing enemy troops away from the **First Army** front and of deceiving the enemy as to the direction of the main attack.

For the attack on 20 April, General Montgomery decided to strike directly into a series of precipitous ridges and spurs that overlooked **Enfidaville** and the strip of flat land skirting the coast to **Cape Bon**. The attack would be made by **4 Indian Division** and **2 New Zealand Division**, while **50 (Northumberland) Division** covered the coastal flank and **7 Armoured Division** the inland flank. These latter divisions were to be used for exploitation should a firm lodgment be made in the hills.

The **New Zealand Division**, which had **8 British Armoured Brigade** under command, was already in action to the south and west of **Enfidaville**, and was to attack into the hills from that area. **4 Indian Division** was, in the first place, to attack **Djebel Garci**, a very rugged feature, farther to the west. The **New Zealand** sector included **Djebel Ogla**, a roundish feature of no great height, and, beyond it, a long, regular ridge called **Hamaid en Nakrla**. These two features were on the right and were the objectives of **6 NZ Brigade** (commanded by Brigadier



W. G. Gentry <sup>1</sup>), which in addition had to contend with Wadi el Brek, a deep, twisting wadi winding down from the hills. Farther left were **Djebel Bir**, a horseshoe-shaped feature with well-graded sides to the south and a steep cliff-side to the north, and, immediately to the left separated only by a narrow valley, **Takrouna**. Beyond Bir and **Takrouna**, and almost parallel to the divisional front, the road to **Zaghoun** ran between shallow ditches, with the southern slopes of Djebel Cherachir rising almost from the roadside. To the north of Cherachir was the dominating feature **Djebel Froukr**, a jagged ridge popularly known as the ‘Saw Tooth’. These features were the objectives of 5 NZ Brigade, commanded by **Brigadier H. K. Kippenberger**. <sup>2</sup>

**Takrouna**, a bald outcrop of limestone rock, rose abruptly some 600 feet from the plain occupied by **Eighth Army**. From various vantage points in the divisional area it was observed that buildings crowned the hill on three different levels: on the summit was a domed mosque at the south-east corner, with a square-towered building close by and a huddle of smaller buildings disappearing from sight over the crest—local inhabitants said that this was an old Berber fortress,



**TAKROUNA**

and to the infantry fighting there it became known as the pinnacle; on the lower level, buildings were clustered on a ridge jutting out to the west from the mosque—this area was later called the ledge; directly

behind the pinnacle, and seen only from the south-west, more buildings sprawled untidily down the top of a shoulder that appeared to end at the road—this was known as the village. To the south of **Takrouna** were olive orchards, planted in orderly rows and enclosed by ditches and cactus hedges, a thick, fleshy variety of cactus that grew about six feet high and sprouted hard, sharp spines from serrations in ten-inch stems. On the east side was the valley separating **Djebel Bir** and **Takrouna**, and on the west side **Takrouna** dropped sharply to very broken country which was scoured by a deep wadi, dry at this time of the year. Patches of cactus grew in uneven clumps at the bottom of **Takrouna**, but the higher levels were precipitous, rocky, and bare of all vegetation.

Along the whole divisional front, in the forward positions held by the infantry before the attack, was a wet-bottomed wadi with many tributaries. Crossings were made over this wadi by the engineers during the nights before the infantry advanced. Between the wadi and the olives green barley grew knee high in unfenced fields.

Every effort was made to keep the plan as simple as possible, although complications could not be avoided on the left sector. The start line was to be taped just to the north of the wadi in the forward positions, and on this line the battalions would form up with coloured lights, shaded and on pickets, marking the boundaries between them. The axis of advance was at right-angles to the start line, and as the direction of the attack was almost from south to north it was hoped that the infantry would keep direction by the Pole Star, which would be straight ahead. The objectives were to be reached in two stages: in the first stage 6 Brigade would capture Ogla and surrounding country with two battalions, and 5 Brigade would advance to the road with a battalion on either side of **Takrouna**; while in the second stage 6 Brigade would carry on to Hamaid en Nakrla with the same two battalions, and the third battalion of 5 Brigade would move up the valley between Bir and **Takrouna**, through country won in the first stage, form up just beyond the road and carry the attack on to **Djebel Froukr**. The third battalion from 6 Brigade would be in reserve. Seven field and two medium

regiments were to support the Division, firing a barrage that would lift 100 yards each two minutes, the optimistically planned rate of advance for the infantry. In addition the artillery would fire concentrations on selected targets right up to the time when the infantry was expected to reach them. Guns were to fire smoke on the outside edges of the barrage to mark the flanks of the divisional sector.

A regiment of tanks was attached to each brigade, and from these, troops (three tanks in each) were detached to support the engineering parties that were to clear tracks for the supporting arms through the minefields known to cover the enemy positions, and one troop was attached to 28 (Maori) Battalion to crush passages through the cactus in its area.

Such was the plan in outline. Little was known of the enemy dispositions, other than the general appreciation that the main defences lay to the north of **Takrouna**. It was generally accepted that 5 Brigade, with Bir, **Takrouna**, and Froukr, three awkward, easily defended features in its sector, would meet greater opposition than 6 Brigade. **Takrouna** lay well forward in the 5 Brigade sector, completely dominating the whole area, and its capture was essential—without **Takrouna** the guns would not be able to move up to cover any other ground won during the attack, ground that would itself be overlooked from the summit. They would, in fact, be under direct observation and exposed to observed counter-battery fire in the positions from which they fired the barrage, and into which they were only able to move during the three nights preceding the attack, and where they had to be camouflaged during daylight.

Of the two 5 Brigade battalions that would take part in the first phase, 28 (Maori) Battalion, commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel C. M. Bennett, <sup>3</sup> was to advance on the east side of **Takrouna**, and 21 Battalion, commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel R. W. Harding, <sup>4</sup> on the west side. **Takrouna** itself was the responsibility of the **Maori Battalion**, although the Brigade Commander told Harding that 21 Battalion was to help the Maoris if opportunity occurred. Both battalion commanders

were told that attack by the apparently most difficult routes might be the easiest, though it was planned that the Maoris should attack the summit of **Takrouna** from the rear after the battalion had reached the road, striking back along the easier grades of the northern slopes. They were also to take any chance of forcing a way up the steep southern or eastern slopes.

**23 Battalion**, commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel R. E. ROMANS,<sup>5</sup> was to capture Djebel Froukr. The Brigade Commander made it quite clear that this battalion was to fight for its start line beyond the **Zaghouan** road, should the **28 Battalion** attack not go according to plan, and that it was to carry on the attack to Froukr whether or not **28** and **21** Battalions reached their objectives.

**Zero hour was an hour before midnight on 19 April.**

# EPIISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## ATTACK

## **ATTACK**

**PRECISELY** at zero hour gun flashes sparked and flickered behind the infantry on the start line. The soft whish-whish of the first shells rose to an angry, jagged muttering, while the staccato cracks of the nearest guns were lost in the exhilarating pandemonium of the barrage. The battalions began to move forward.

On the right of 5 Brigade, **28 Battalion** advanced with three companies forward, while one company followed to deal with any enemy pockets that might be missed. Moving over fairly level ground, broken only by small wadis and the cultivated patches of barley, the battalion soon ran into enemy opposition. Heavy artillery and mortar fire caused many casualties, and the ground became more difficult. Empty trenches, booby-trapped minefields, cactus hedges and ditches made the companies lose formation.

On the right of the battalion, A Company (Major W. Porter <sup>6</sup>) reached the south side of **Djebel Bir** with depleted ranks and all three platoon commanders wounded. Machine-gun fire swept down the hill and across the valley from **Takrouna**, fire so unexpectedly vicious that the men sought cover. The Company Commander was hit by a mortar bomb while reorganising the company, which, reduced in strength by one half and now without officers, remained on the lower slopes of Bir for the rest of the night.

In the centre, C Company (Captain W. M. Awarau <sup>7</sup>) was halted in the valley between Bir and **Takrouna**. Thick minefields and enemy fire of all types had taken a heavy toll, and Lieutenant W. Te A. Haig <sup>8</sup> found that he was the only officer not a casualty. He left instructions for the other platoons to follow and tried to push on with his own platoon, but soon realised, when the men with him had dwindled to three, that further advance in the centre was impossible.

On the left, B Company (Captain C. Sorenson <sup>9</sup>) after hacking its way through the cactus hedges with machetes, got as far as the south-

eastern end of **Takrouna**. Here the company was stopped by murderous fire pouring down from positions on the slopes of **Takrouna**. All three forward companies were now halted without having come to close grips with the enemy, halted by carefully prepared minefields covered by machine guns, mortars, and artillery.

Headquarters **28 Battalion** had moved up behind these three forward companies and had reached a white farmhouse at the south end of the valley between Bir and **Takrouna**. Colonel Bennett had lost communication with the companies but could see that the attack had slowed down. He sent Lieutenant M. Wikiriwhi, <sup>10</sup> his Intelligence Officer, across to B Company to find out the cause of the delay. When word of B Company's plight was brought back, Bennett at once sent orders to the Company Commander to push round to the east of the enemy positions holding him up, to join C Company, and to advance with that company to the road.

While Wikiriwhi was taking these instructions to B Company, Bennett went in search of C Company, elements of which, without officers, he found farther up the valley. He did not get as far north as Haig, but told the C Company men that they were to stay where they were, that Haig was to take command, and that the advance was to be carried on to the road when B Company joined them. Haig was probably the last man to hear of these orders, for he was trying to reach the road with his platoon and was expecting the rest of C Company to join him.

Colonel Bennett could judge by the amount of firing that B Company was still held up to the south of **Takrouna**; nothing was known of A Company. Determined to get at least two companies moving, he went back and across to B Company to accelerate its advance. He found it still pinned down by the heavy fire from **Takrouna**. Sending back instructions to the tanks attached to the battalion to use their guns on the southern slopes of **Takrouna**, Bennett ordered B Company to join C Company. A party was detailed to engage the enemy on **Takrouna** with Bren-gun fire while the forward movement was made.

Soon after this all control within **28 Battalion** was lost. Colonel Bennett, still anxious to co-ordinate the movements of B and C Companies, had moved directly across towards C Company and had been severely wounded on a mine. Captain Sorensen and one of his platoon commanders were wounded and evacuated. Lieutenant Wikiriwhi had returned to the white farmhouse to find the CO had gone and that Battalion Headquarters was virtually non-existent. Haig was not able to collect the remnants of C Company. The action was carried on by isolated sections and platoons and by D Company, directed by the two or three remaining officers and spirited NCOs.

From B Company two platoons, commanded by Second-Lieutenant W. P. Anaru <sup>11</sup> and Sergeant T. Trainor, <sup>12</sup> skirted the eastern slopes of **Takrouna** and literally drove themselves forward through a hail of fire. Two sections of Anaru's platoon reached the road—in one of them a single survivor. Trainor had run into a cluster of machine-gun posts giving cover to two anti-tank guns. A rapid and vigorous attack soon decided the issue, and after rounding up 27 prisoners the platoon battled on towards the road. Here the men were isolated, were faced by fire from positions across the road just as heavy as that through which they had come, and were not able to do very much for the time being.

The third platoon from B Company, now commanded by Sergeant J. Rogers, <sup>13</sup> stayed in the wadi to the south-east of **Takrouna** ready to make a feint attack up its southern slopes, as originally planned.

Meanwhile D Company (Captain P. F. Te H. Ornberg <sup>14</sup>), which had had the original task of mopping up but which had concentrated on the CO's instructions to help B Company get past the south-east corner of **Takrouna**, was preparing to push forward to the road. Ornberg had made this decision because he could see that immediate action was necessary if the battalion was to reach its objective. While D Company formed up—casualties had already been suffered and, including stragglers from B and C Companies, its total strength was now only about forty all told—other events took place that have a bearing on the final capture of



## **Takrouna.**

Out to the right, 6 NZ Brigade had all but reached its final objective after a relatively easy advance opposed only by defensive fire. The brigade was being reorganised and by the morning would be in a sound position.

On the left of **28 Battalion**, west of **Takrouna**, 21 Battalion had met very strong opposition, had suffered heavy casualties, and had been withdrawn.

This withdrawal had followed an extremely difficult and costly advance. 21 Battalion had left the start line with three companies forward and two platoons of the remaining company following in reserve. The third platoon of this company had been left on Point 121, ready to form the pivot of the gunline that was to cover the west flank of 5 Brigade during the second phase of the operation. Colonel Harding moved with his headquarters between the leading and reserve companies.

Advancing on the right of the battalion, C Company (Major B. M. Laird <sup>15</sup>) had soon run into the heavy fire that covered all approaches to **Takrouna**. Cactus hedges had prevented an orderly advance and the two forward platoons lost contact. Lieutenant R. A. Shaw, <sup>16</sup> commanding 15 Platoon on the right, had been able to get his men through to the immediate platoon objective to the west of **Takrouna** without casualties, but, failing to make contact with the rest of his company, had withdrawn to Battalion Headquarters on Harding's instructions. On the left, 13 Platoon (Lieutenant D. J. Ashley <sup>17</sup>) had forced its way to an oval-shaped patch of prickly pear on the west slopes of **Takrouna**, but had then been pinned down by small-arms fire from the hill above. It seemed hopeless to continue without support on either flank, and the platoon withdrew to Company Headquarters. Here Ashley and Lieutenant I. H. Hirst, <sup>18</sup> who commanded 14 Platoon in reserve, attempted to reform the men and find a way to overcome the machine-gun posts that were holding up the advance. The Company Commander had already

made unsuccessful attempts to get forward and had returned to Headquarters 5 Brigade with sections from both 13 and 14 Platoons. The remainder of C Company joined Battalion Headquarters.

The other two forward companies had been more successful. A Company (Captain G. A. H. Bullock-Douglas <sup>19</sup>) in the centre and B Company (Captain W. J. G. Roach <sup>20</sup>) on the left had each left the start line with two platoons forward, followed by Company Headquarters and the third platoon. Enemy shelling at the start line caused some casualties. The shelling, which soon included nebelwerfer (a multiple mortar that hurled six large shells at a time with a mad, screaming sound), mortar and small-arms fire, increased during the advance and cut off the Company Headquarters and reserve platoon of each company from the forward platoons. Indeed, so sudden had the enemy reaction been to the forward movement of the barrage that when 8 Platoon of A Company paused a few moments to pass back a handful of prisoners to its reserve section, that section, while detailing a guard for the prisoners, was forced to take cover from heavy small-arms fire from **Takrouna**. The rest of A Company and the leading two platoons of B Company reached the **Zaghuan** road with little trouble, closely following the barrage.

Once at the road it was soon clear that the enemy held a dominating ridge immediately to the north. From A Company Lieutenant J. C. Chalmers, <sup>21</sup> commanding 8 Platoon, went off to the right to find out if the Maoris had got through to the road on the other side of **Takrouna**, while Lance-Sergeant L. A. Steiner <sup>22</sup> organised 7 Platoon for an attack on the ridge, leaving the two sections of 8 Platoon on the south side of the road. Steiner found that the enemy was firmly entrenched in deep weapon pits on the ridge, but a determined attack with tommy guns and hand grenades soon gave some degree of success. Five machine-gun posts were destroyed and opposition had slackened when Steiner realised that only two other men besides himself were left standing. There was only one thing to do—the men went back to the road. Chalmers had returned to the roadside also, without having seen or heard **28 Battalion**.

All that remained of the forward platoons of A Company, about 25 men, were left at the south side of the road under a sergeant, and Chalmers and Steiner went back to look for Battalion Headquarters.

During this period 12 and 11 Platoons of B Company had, together, been attacking the western end of the same ridge across the road that Steiner had attacked. The platoon commanders, Lieutenants R. Donaldson <sup>23</sup> and G. M. Taylor, <sup>24</sup> led the men through mortar and small-arms fire to the bottom of the ridge. Here hand grenades, tossed by the enemy from pits and trenches, killed and wounded many but did not break up the attack. Shooting and stabbing, the platoons fought on up the ridge. A typical exploit was that of Private A. T. Luxford, <sup>25</sup> who took command of a section when its NCOs had been wounded. Led by this determined soldier the section captured a 50-millimetre anti-tank gun, two machine-gun posts, and a mortar pit. When the whole section except himself had been struck down, Luxford battled on until his own ammunition, and any he could pick up, was exhausted and he himself wounded. Farther up the ridge Sergeant L. N. Parris, <sup>26</sup> who had led another group, found that the area had been cleared but that he had only four men left capable of moving. Parris set up a machine-gun post in a captured pit, but when it seemed that the enemy was going to counter-attack and that no support was available, he returned to the road with the few survivors. Weeks later the graves of Donaldson and Taylor, with those of many of their men, were found on the ridge where they had died fighting.

Meanwhile the rest of 21 Battalion had been stopped farther back. Both rear platoons of A and B Companies, cut off from the forward platoons, had unsuccessfully tried to get to the road through the now very severe fire from **Takrouna**, and after suffering many casualties had been taken back to Battalion Headquarters. From 9 Platoon A Company, Second-Lieutenant J. T. Upton <sup>27</sup> disappeared on what must have been a determined effort to reach the east side of **Takrouna**, for his body was later found at the foot of the northern slopes. Colonel Harding, who had been wounded in the hand, had established his Headquarters some

hundreds of yards to the west of **Takrouna**. D Company (Captain I. A. Murray <sup>28</sup>), in reserve, had suffered casualties from mortar and artillery fire, and had been put between Headquarters and **Takrouna** as a protective screen across the axis of advance. The Company Commander had been killed. Harding had had runners from A and B Companies when they reached the road, but no further news as all communications had broken down. Shaw had brought what men he could collect from C Company.

The Battalion Commander could see that the south-west and west slopes of **Takrouna** were still occupied by the enemy, and in the absence of success signals from **28 Battalion** he believed that the summit was still held. He accordingly sent word to A and B Companies to withdraw to the area of his headquarters if they did not make contact with **28 Battalion**, presuming that they would be without support on either flank. A runner was sent to Brigade Headquarters with this information.

However, before this runner arrived (about 2 a.m.) **Brigadier Kippenberger** had made an important decision. Very little information had come back to Brigade Headquarters, close to the start line, where the Commander and staff were anxiously waiting for news of the battle. Some walking wounded had told of desperate fighting, the medical officers had reported that there were many officer casualties from **28 Battalion**, the Commander C Company, 21 Battalion, had come back with the disquieting information that his company was scattered and stopped. Then a runner had arrived from B Company, 21 Battalion, with word that both A and B Company Commanders were missing but that Taylor and Donaldson, with 50 men, were fighting on to link up with 23 Battalion. Better news had come from the east side of **Takrouna**. The 23 Battalion Adjutant had 'come up' on the wireless to say that **28 Battalion** had had partial success and that, judging by the sounds of fighting well forward, 23 Battalion was near the final objective.

Little to go on, but enough for a decision that would put the Brigade at least in a position to hold on to what it had won. **Brigadier Kippenberger** sent two liaison officers, moving separately, with

instructions that 21 Battalion was to withdraw to its assembly area should its existing position be untenable at first light. Should the battalion withdraw, the Brigade Commander intended to use it as a reserve on the east side of **Takrouna**, where he believed some measure of success had been achieved. In taking this step, almost unique in the history of the Division, the Brigade Commander believed that he was abandoning those gallant men from A and B Companies of 21 Battalion who had fought on well beyond the road.

On the battlefield Colonel Harding, after conferring with such officers as had returned to his headquarters, ordered the forward companies to pull back to their original assembly positions if contact was not made with 28 or 23 Battalions before dawn. Such withdrawal was eventually made.

There remained the east side of **Takrouna** and the summit itself. Here, indeed, some measure of success had been achieved.

### *23 Battalion captures Cherchir*

23 Battalion had moved up behind **28 Battalion**, and was soon aware that all was not going well with the attack. The small-arms and mortar fire did not diminish in intensity and, with artillery fire, caused some casualties. Colonel Romans was wounded and Captain W. B. Thomas <sup>29</sup> took command, assuring his CO that he would carry out the Brigade Commander's instruction that the battalion would fight for its start line.

Calling on B and D Companies, which were leading, and giving orders that the remainder were to follow, Thomas got the men moving, firing to the front and shouting loudly. Lieutenant Haig of C Company, **28 Battalion**, returning to find the rest of his men, met this advance head on and later said of it, 'It was a particularly vociferous one, and I can assure you that it was a fearsome thing to encounter, specially when on one's own.'

But the method worked. Advancing in bounds of about 200 yards,

going to ground together to fire concentrated bursts on machine-gun positions on Bir and **Takrouna**—picked out by the red tracer used by the enemy—stumbling against wires that were connected to weapon pits as a signal for the enemy to fire along them, dodging mines and booby-traps, the two companies broke through the valley and reached the road. Here a further effort was demanded, as Djebel Cherachir, immediately across the road, was obviously held by the enemy and the barrage had been lost.

By this time both B and D Companies were much reduced in strength, and despite repeated shouts to C and A Companies to come up, probably not heard in the commotion, the two rear companies had not followed. Thomas, after a quick check, found himself with 17 men in D Company and 20 in B Company. He decided not to wait but sent back the Intelligence Officer, Lieutenant A. F. Bailey,<sup>30</sup> to bring the other companies forward.

Lieutenant A. S. Robins,<sup>31</sup> himself slightly wounded, who had taken command of B Company when Captain S. Wilson<sup>32</sup> was wounded, was ordered to take the eastern slopes of Cherachir, while Captain H. C. Black<sup>33</sup> was to take the western end of the same feature with D Company.

The shouting and yelling that Thomas had encouraged during the advance through the valley, partly to discourage the enemy, partly to keep up the spirits of the men, had died down. The crash of exploding shells, the sharper crunch of mortar bombs, the quick chatter of machine guns, and the sudden burst of light from a flare showing clearly the outline of the ridge ahead, were sufficient evidence that grim work remained.

Robins posted two Brens to cover his advance, and in complete silence led his company towards an abrupt gully running up the east end of Cherachir. Two parties of Germans fell back before the company, pausing at intervals to fire at the advancing men. The Brens, firing at the flashes, gave the enemy little chance for damaging fire, and there

was no delay. The gully was very steep, rough and stony, but although it was clear that the enemy held entrenched positions on the crest the advance was not observed, despite flares and mortars fired right over the heads of the attackers. Once on the crest the main points of resistance were located farther along the ridge to the west, and to the east from the two parties of retreating Germans. Fortunately D Company claimed the attention of the position to the west, and the 'mobile' Germans were encouraged by rifle fire to continue their retreat. Robins sited his men just below the crest in an effort to avoid the shelling which soon started; some of the men were able to dig in, others prepared rough shelters behind boulders.

D Company had met greater opposition and had lost several men, including Captain Black —last seen rushing forward revolver in hand and found killed many days later—but had finally stormed the crest of Cherachir. All officers in the company had become casualties: Sergeant F. J. Muir <sup>34</sup> commanded a platoon, then assumed the duties of CSM, and finally added a second platoon to his command, organising several short bayonet charges. Corporal W. S. Smellie <sup>35</sup> commanded the third platoon for the last stage of the battle.

As had been the case with B Company on the eastern end of Cherachir, the men of D Company were forced to take cover from enemy shelling just below the crest of the ridge. They stayed there in one organised party for the rest of the night, with enemy troops occupying the northern slopes. Occasional enemy grenades were still being thrown over the crest at daybreak.

Meanwhile Thomas was organising the rest of the battalion as it arrived. For a while the situation possessed all the elements of a comic opera. The Germans were calling out to each other from Bir, **Takrouna**, and Cherachir, giving the impression that they were concerting some action against the battalion, but in all probability expressing anxious doubts as to their own safety. One armed party of about twenty went dashing past Thomas's headquarters and completely ignored the small group: it in turn was left alone. Three prisoners, the first of a steady



trickle, were brought in, and Private W.D. Dawson <sup>36</sup> was instructed to tell them in German to call out to their companions to surrender. This was done without result.

The situation gradually sorted itself out. Captain C. A. Slee <sup>37</sup> came up with one platoon (Lieutenant H. Montgomery <sup>38</sup>) from C Company and went back to find the rest of his men, while the platoon cleaned out some remaining enemy positions on the south-east end of Cherachir. D Company, **28 Battalion**, arrived. It had detoured the enemy opposition on the south and east of **Takrouna** and had come through the valley in complete silence, lying low whenever the enemy opened fire. Captain Ornberg, with many others, had been wounded. This company was sent to assist Montgomery, and after each party had mistaken the other for enemy troops, settled down facing Bir and **Takrouna**.

Other elements of 23 Battalion, collected by Lieutenant A. C. Marett <sup>39</sup> from the confusion still present in the valley, together with small parties from **28 Battalion** which readily agreed to fit in with Thomas's plans, gradually came up to the foot of Cherachir and were incorporated into the scheme for all-round defence. By morning Thomas had his men well sited for an expected counter-attack, but none was delivered and the troops were able to fire at remaining pockets of infantry within range, paying particular attention to enemy weapon pits behind them on the northern slopes of **Takrouna**. Fortunately, as the battalion had no supporting arms, the enemy made no move with his tanks.

**Takrouna** itself remained in enemy hands. This feature now became the focus of the Division's effort, for without its capture it would have been very difficult to keep the ground captured by 6 NZ Brigade and on the east side of the feature itself, and the guns would have been hopelessly exposed.





## 5 BRIGADE SECTOR

**Takrouna is in the left top corner, Djebel Bir (marked Bin) on the right. Djebel Cherachir is top right. The markings were made by the Brigadier after the attack and show the axes of advance of the 21, 23, and 28 Battalions**



5 FIELD AMBULANCE ADS FOR THE TAKROUNA ATTACK  
in the field of barley and cactus

**5 FIELD AMBULANCE ADS FOR THE TAKROUNA ATTACK in the field of barley and cactus**

LOOKING NORTH FROM TAKROUNA  
Djebel Cherachir is beyond the road. In the left foreground is a corner of the lower village.



**SHELLFIRE NEAR 28 BATTALION RAP**



LOOKING SOUTH FROM TAKROUNA

Sgt Rogers began his attack from the near corner of the olive orchards.

**LOOKING SOUTH FROM TAKROUNA**

**Sgt Rogers began his attack from the near corner of the olive orchards**

LOOKING NORTH FROM TAKROUNA  
Djebel Cherachir is beyond the road. In the left foreground is a corner of the lower village.



**LOOKING NORTH FROM TAKROUNA**

**Djebel Cherachir is beyond the road. In the left foreground is a corner of the lower village**



TAKROUNA from the  
start line

**TAKROUNA from the start line**

THE LEDGE from the Pinnacle

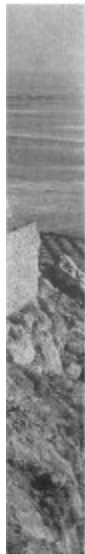


**THE LEDGE from the Pinnacle**

LOOKING ALONG THE LEDGE to the Pinnacle



**LOOKING ALONG THE LEDGE to the Pinnacle**



THE VILLAGE from the east face of the Pinnacle



**THE VILLAGE from the east face of the Pinnacle**



FROM TAKROUNA south-  
west to the 21 Battalion area

**FROM TAKROUNA south-west to the 21 Battalion area**



THE CLIFF FACE ON THE  
EAST SIDE OF THE PINNACLE

**THE CLIFF FACE ON THE EAST SIDE OF THE PINNACLE**

SHELL HOLE AT  
TAKROUNA made by  
17-pounder anti-tank gun



**SHELL HOLE AT TAKROUNA made by 17-pounder anti-tank gun**



AFTER THE BATTLE  
Group of 5 BRIGADE STAFF  
(left to right) Lt R. D. Hoggans,  
Lt I. H. Hirst, Capt W. J. G.  
Roach, Maj M. C. Fairbrother,  
Brig H.K. Kippenberger, Lt-Col  
R. W. Harding, Lt H. S. Wells  
(behind Harding), Capt J. H.  
Ensor, Col R. C. Queree, Rev.  
Fr. J. F. Henley (at rear), Capt  
E. D. Blundell



AFTER THE BATTLE

**Group of 5 BRIGADE STAFF**

*left to right*) Lt R. D. Hoggans, Lt I. H. Hirst, Capt W. J. G. Roach, **Maj M C. Fairbrother, Brig H. K. Kippenberger, Lt-Col R. W. Harding, Lt H. S. Wells behind Harding), Capt J. H. Ensor, Col R. C. Queree, Rev. Fr. J. F. Henley (at rear), Capt E. D. Blundell**



CAPT W. B. THOMAS  
**CAPT W. B. THOMAS**



SGT H. MANAHI  
**SGT H. MANAHI**



SGT L. A. STEINER  
**SGT L. A. STEINER**



LT-COL C. M. BENNETT  
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CAPT A. F. HARDING  
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LT-COL R. E. ROMANS  
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# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## [SECTION]

**PRECISELY** at zero hour gun flashes sparked and flickered behind the infantry on the start line. The soft whish-whish of the first shells rose to an angry, jagged muttering, while the staccato cracks of the nearest guns were lost in the exhilarating pandemonium of the barrage. The battalions began to move forward.

On the right of 5 Brigade, **28 Battalion** advanced with three companies forward, while one company followed to deal with any enemy pockets that might be missed. Moving over fairly level ground, broken only by small wadis and the cultivated patches of barley, the battalion soon ran into enemy opposition. Heavy artillery and mortar fire caused many casualties, and the ground became more difficult. Empty trenches, booby-trapped minefields, cactus hedges and ditches made the companies lose formation.

On the right of the battalion, A Company (Major W. Porter <sup>6</sup>) reached the south side of **Djebel Bir** with depleted ranks and all three platoon commanders wounded. Machine-gun fire swept down the hill and across the valley from **Takrouna**, fire so unexpectedly vicious that the men sought cover. The Company Commander was hit by a mortar bomb while reorganising the company, which, reduced in strength by one half and now without officers, remained on the lower slopes of Bir for the rest of the night.

In the centre, C Company (Captain W. M. Awarau <sup>7</sup>) was halted in the valley between Bir and **Takrouna**. Thick minefields and enemy fire of all types had taken a heavy toll, and Lieutenant W. Te A. Haig <sup>8</sup> found that he was the only officer not a casualty. He left instructions for the other platoons to follow and tried to push on with his own platoon, but soon realised, when the men with him had dwindled to three, that further advance in the centre was impossible.

On the left, B Company (Captain C. Sorenson <sup>9</sup>) after hacking its way through the cactus hedges with machetes, got as far as the southeastern end of **Takrouna**. Here the company was stopped by murderous fire pouring down from positions on the slopes of **Takrouna**. All three forward companies were now halted without having come to close grips with the enemy, halted by carefully prepared minefields covered by machine guns, mortars, and artillery.

Headquarters **28 Battalion** had moved up behind these three forward companies and had reached a white farmhouse at the south end of the valley between Bir and **Takrouna**. Colonel Bennett had lost communication with the companies but could see that the attack had slowed down. He sent Lieutenant M. Wikiriwhi, <sup>10</sup> his Intelligence Officer, across to B Company to find out the cause of the delay. When word of B Company's plight was brought back, Bennett at once sent orders to the Company Commander to push round to the east of the enemy positions holding him up, to join C Company, and to advance with that company to the road.

While Wikiriwhi was taking these instructions to B Company, Bennett went in search of C Company, elements of which, without officers, he found farther up the valley. He did not get as far north as Haig, but told the C Company men that they were to stay where they were, that Haig was to take command, and that the advance was to be carried on to the road when B Company joined them. Haig was probably the last man to hear of these orders, for he was trying to reach the road with his platoon and was expecting the rest of C Company to join him.

Colonel Bennett could judge by the amount of firing that B Company was still held up to the south of **Takrouna**; nothing was known of A Company. Determined to get at least two companies moving, he went back and across to B Company to accelerate its advance. He found it still pinned down by the heavy fire from **Takrouna**. Sending back instructions to the tanks attached to the battalion to use their guns on the southern slopes of **Takrouna**, Bennett ordered B Company to join C

Company. A party was detailed to engage the enemy on **Takrouna** with Bren-gun fire while the forward movement was made.

Soon after this all control within **28 Battalion** was lost. Colonel Bennett, still anxious to co-ordinate the movements of B and C Companies, had moved directly across towards C Company and had been severely wounded on a mine. Captain Sorensen and one of his platoon commanders were wounded and evacuated. Lieutenant Wikiriwhi had returned to the white farmhouse to find the CO had gone and that Battalion Headquarters was virtually non-existent. Haig was not able to collect the remnants of C Company. The action was carried on by isolated sections and platoons and by D Company, directed by the two or three remaining officers and spirited NCOs.

From B Company two platoons, commanded by Second-Lieutenant W. P. Anaru <sup>11</sup> and Sergeant T. Trainor, <sup>12</sup> skirted the eastern slopes of **Takrouna** and literally drove themselves forward through a hail of fire. Two sections of Anaru's platoon reached the road—in one of them a single survivor. Trainor had run into a cluster of machine-gun posts giving cover to two anti-tank guns. A rapid and vigorous attack soon decided the issue, and after rounding up 27 prisoners the platoon battled on towards the road. Here the men were isolated, were faced by fire from positions across the road just as heavy as that through which they had come, and were not able to do very much for the time being.

The third platoon from B Company, now commanded by Sergeant J. Rogers, <sup>13</sup> stayed in the wadi to the south-east of **Takrouna** ready to make a feint attack up its southern slopes, as originally planned.

Meanwhile D Company (Captain P. F. Te H. Ornberg <sup>14</sup>), which had had the original task of mopping up but which had concentrated on the CO's instructions to help B Company get past the south-east corner of **Takrouna**, was preparing to push forward to the road. Ornberg had made this decision because he could see that immediate action was necessary if the battalion was to reach its objective. While D Company formed up—casualties had already been suffered and, including stragglers from B

and C Companies, its total strength was now only about forty all told—other events took place that have a bearing on the final capture of **Takrouna**.

Out to the right, 6 NZ Brigade had all but reached its final objective after a relatively easy advance opposed only by defensive fire. The brigade was being reorganised and by the morning would be in a sound position.

On the left of **28 Battalion**, west of **Takrouna**, 21 Battalion had met very strong opposition, had suffered heavy casualties, and had been withdrawn.

This withdrawal had followed an extremely difficult and costly advance. 21 Battalion had left the start line with three companies forward and two platoons of the remaining company following in reserve. The third platoon of this company had been left on Point 121, ready to form the pivot of the gunline that was to cover the west flank of 5 Brigade during the second phase of the operation. Colonel Harding moved with his headquarters between the leading and reserve companies.

Advancing on the right of the battalion, C Company (Major B. M. Laird <sup>15</sup>) had soon run into the heavy fire that covered all approaches to **Takrouna**. Cactus hedges had prevented an orderly advance and the two forward platoons lost contact. Lieutenant R. A. Shaw, <sup>16</sup> commanding 15 Platoon on the right, had been able to get his men through to the immediate platoon objective to the west of **Takrouna** without casualties, but, failing to make contact with the rest of his company, had withdrawn to Battalion Headquarters on Harding's instructions. On the left, 13 Platoon (Lieutenant D. J. Ashley <sup>17</sup>) had forced its way to an oval-shaped patch of prickly pear on the west slopes of **Takrouna**, but had then been pinned down by small-arms fire from the hill above. It seemed hopeless to continue without support on either flank, and the platoon withdrew to Company Headquarters. Here Ashley and Lieutenant I. H. Hirst, <sup>18</sup> who commanded 14 Platoon in reserve, attempted to

reform the men and find a way to overcome the machine-gun posts that were holding up the advance. The Company Commander had already made unsuccessful attempts to get forward and had returned to Headquarters 5 Brigade with sections from both 13 and 14 Platoons. The remainder of C Company joined Battalion Headquarters.

The other two forward companies had been more successful. A Company (Captain G. A. H. Bullock-Douglas <sup>19</sup>) in the centre and B Company (Captain W. J. G. Roach <sup>20</sup>) on the left had each left the start line with two platoons forward, followed by Company Headquarters and the third platoon. Enemy shelling at the start line caused some casualties. The shelling, which soon included nebelwerfer (a multiple mortar that hurled six large shells at a time with a mad, screaming sound), mortar and small-arms fire, increased during the advance and cut off the Company Headquarters and reserve platoon of each company from the forward platoons. Indeed, so sudden had the enemy reaction been to the forward movement of the barrage that when 8 Platoon of A Company paused a few moments to pass back a handful of prisoners to its reserve section, that section, while detailing a guard for the prisoners, was forced to take cover from heavy small-arms fire from **Takrouna**. The rest of A Company and the leading two platoons of B Company reached the **Zaghouan** road with little trouble, closely following the barrage.

Once at the road it was soon clear that the enemy held a dominating ridge immediately to the north. From A Company Lieutenant J. C. Chalmers, <sup>21</sup> commanding 8 Platoon, went off to the right to find out if the Maoris had got through to the road on the other side of **Takrouna**, while Lance-Sergeant L. A. Steiner <sup>22</sup> organised 7 Platoon for an attack on the ridge, leaving the two sections of 8 Platoon on the south side of the road. Steiner found that the enemy was firmly entrenched in deep weapon pits on the ridge, but a determined attack with tommy guns and hand grenades soon gave some degree of success. Five machine-gun posts were destroyed and opposition had slackened when Steiner realised that only two other men besides himself were left standing. There was

only one thing to do—the men went back to the road. Chalmers had returned to the roadside also, without having seen or heard **28 Battalion**. All that remained of the forward platoons of A Company, about 25 men, were left at the south side of the road under a sergeant, and Chalmers and Steiner went back to look for Battalion Headquarters.

During this period 12 and 11 Platoons of B Company had, together, been attacking the western end of the same ridge across the road that Steiner had attacked. The platoon commanders, Lieutenants R. Donaldson <sup>23</sup> and G. M. Taylor, <sup>24</sup> led the men through mortar and small-arms fire to the bottom of the ridge. Here hand grenades, tossed by the enemy from pits and trenches, killed and wounded many but did not break up the attack. Shooting and stabbing, the platoons fought on up the ridge. A typical exploit was that of Private A. T. Luxford, <sup>25</sup> who took command of a section when its NCOs had been wounded. Led by this determined soldier the section captured a 50-millimetre anti-tank gun, two machine-gun posts, and a mortar pit. When the whole section except himself had been struck down, Luxford battled on until his own ammunition, and any he could pick up, was exhausted and he himself wounded. Farther up the ridge Sergeant L. N. Parris, <sup>26</sup> who had led another group, found that the area had been cleared but that he had only four men left capable of moving. Parris set up a machine-gun post in a captured pit, but when it seemed that the enemy was going to counter-attack and that no support was available, he returned to the road with the few survivors. Weeks later the graves of Donaldson and Taylor, with those of many of their men, were found on the ridge where they had died fighting.

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The Battalion Commander could see that the south-west and west slopes of **Takrouna** were still occupied by the enemy, and in the absence of success signals from **28 Battalion** he believed that the summit was still held. He accordingly sent word to A and B Companies to withdraw to the area of his headquarters if they did not make contact with **28 Battalion**, presuming that they would be without support on either flank. A runner was sent to Brigade Headquarters with this information.

However, before this runner arrived (about 2 a.m.) **Brigadier Kippenberger** had made an important decision. Very little information had come back to Brigade Headquarters, close to the start line, where the Commander and staff were anxiously waiting for news of the battle. Some walking wounded had told of desperate fighting, the medical officers had reported that there were many officer casualties from **28 Battalion**, the Commander C Company, **21 Battalion**, had come back with the disquieting information that his company was scattered and stopped. Then a runner had arrived from B Company, **21 Battalion**, with word that both A and B Company Commanders were missing but that Taylor and Donaldson, with 50 men, were fighting on to link up with **23 Battalion**. Better news had come from the east side of **Takrouna**. The **23 Battalion** Adjutant had 'come up' on the wireless to say that **28 Battalion** had had partial success and that, judging by the sounds of fighting well forward, **23 Battalion** was near the final objective.

Little to go on, but enough for a decision that would put the Brigade



at least in a position to hold on to what it had won. **Brigadier Kippenberger** sent two liaison officers, moving separately, with instructions that 21 Battalion was to withdraw to its assembly area should its existing position be untenable at first light. Should the battalion withdraw, the Brigade Commander intended to use it as a reserve on the east side of **Takrouna**, where he believed some measure of success had been achieved. In taking this step, almost unique in the history of the Division, the Brigade Commander believed that he was abandoning those gallant men from A and B Companies of 21 Battalion who had fought on well beyond the road.

On the battlefield Colonel Harding, after conferring with such officers as had returned to his headquarters, ordered the forward companies to pull back to their original assembly positions if contact was not made with 28 or 23 Battalions before dawn. Such withdrawal was eventually made.

There remained the east side of **Takrouna** and the summit itself. Here, indeed, some measure of success had been achieved.



## EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

### 23 BATTALION CAPTURES CHERCHIR

#### *23 Battalion captures Cherchir*

**23 Battalion had moved up behind 28 Battalion, and was soon aware that all was not going well with the attack. The small-arms and mortar fire did not diminish in intensity and, with artillery fire, caused some casualties. Colonel Romans was wounded and Captain W. B. Thomas<sup>29</sup> took command, assuring his CO that he would carry out the Brigade Commander's instruction that the battalion would fight for its start line.**

**Calling on B and D Companies, which were leading, and giving orders that the remainder were to follow, Thomas got the men moving, firing to the front and shouting loudly. Lieutenant Haig of C Company, 28 Battalion, returning to find the rest of his men, met this advance head on and later said of it, 'It was a particularly vociferous one, and I can assure you that it was a fearsome thing to encounter, specially when on one's own.'**

**But the method worked. Advancing in bounds of about 200 yards, going to ground together to fire concentrated bursts on machine-gun positions on Bir and Takrouna—picked out by the red tracer used by the enemy—stumbling against wires that were connected to weapon pits as a signal for the enemy to fire along them, dodging mines and booby-traps, the two companies broke through the valley and reached the road. Here a further effort was demanded, as Djebel Cherachir, immediately across the road, was obviously held by the enemy and the barrage had been lost.**

**By this time both B and D Companies were much reduced in strength, and despite repeated shouts to C and A Companies to come up, probably not heard in the commotion, the two rear companies had not followed. Thomas, after a quick check, found himself with 17 men in D Company and 20 in B Company. He decided not to wait but sent back**

the Intelligence Officer, Lieutenant A. F. Bailey,<sup>30</sup> to bring the other companies forward.

Lieutenant A. S. Robins,<sup>31</sup> himself slightly wounded, who had taken command of B Company when Captain S. Wilson<sup>32</sup> was wounded, was ordered to take the eastern slopes of Cherachir, while Captain H. C. Black<sup>33</sup> was to take the western end of the same feature with D Company.

The shouting and yelling that Thomas had encouraged during the advance through the valley, partly to discourage the enemy, partly to keep up the spirits of the men, had died down. The crash of exploding shells, the sharper crunch of mortar bombs, the quick chatter of machine guns, and the sudden burst of light from a flare showing clearly the outline of the ridge ahead, were sufficient evidence that grim work remained.

Robins posted two Brens to cover his advance, and in complete silence led his company towards an abrupt gully running up the east end of Cherachir. Two parties of Germans fell back before the company, pausing at intervals to fire at the advancing men. The Brens, firing at the flashes, gave the enemy little chance for damaging fire, and there was no delay. The gully was very steep, rough and stony, but although it was clear that the enemy held entrenched positions on the crest the advance was not observed, despite flares and mortars fired right over the heads of the attackers. Once on the crest the main points of resistance were located farther along the ridge to the west, and to the east from the two parties of retreating Germans. Fortunately D Company claimed the attention of the position to the west, and the 'mobile' Germans were encouraged by rifle fire to continue their retreat. Robins sited his men just below the crest in an effort to avoid the shelling which soon started; some of the men were able to dig in, others prepared rough shelters behind boulders.

D Company had met greater opposition and had lost several men, including Captain Black —last seen rushing forward revolver in hand

and found killed many days later—but had finally stormed the crest of Cherachir. All officers in the company had become casualties: Sergeant F. J. Muir <sup>34</sup> commanded a platoon, then assumed the duties of CSM, and finally added a second platoon to his command, organising several short bayonet charges. Corporal W. S. Smellie <sup>35</sup> commanded the third platoon for the last stage of the battle.

As had been the case with B Company on the eastern end of Cherachir, the men of D Company were forced to take cover from enemy shelling just below the crest of the ridge. They stayed there in one organised party for the rest of the night, with enemy troops occupying the northern slopes. Occasional enemy grenades were still being thrown over the crest at daybreak.

Meanwhile Thomas was organising the rest of the battalion as it arrived. For a while the situation possessed all the elements of a comic opera. The Germans were calling out to each other from Bir, **Takrouna**, and Cherachir, giving the impression that they were concerting some action against the battalion, but in all probability expressing anxious doubts as to their own safety. One armed party of about twenty went dashing past Thomas's headquarters and completely ignored the small group: it in turn was left alone. Three prisoners, the first of a steady trickle, were brought in, and Private W. D. Dawson <sup>36</sup> was instructed to tell them in German to call out to their companions to surrender. This was done without result.

The situation gradually sorted itself out. Captain C. A. Slee <sup>37</sup> came up with one platoon (Lieutenant H. Montgomery <sup>38</sup>) from C Company and went back to find the rest of his men, while the platoon cleaned out some remaining enemy positions on the south-east end of Cherachir. D Company, **28 Battalion**, arrived. It had detoured the enemy opposition on the south and east of **Takrouna** and had come through the valley in complete silence, lying low whenever the enemy opened fire. Captain Ornberg, with many others, had been wounded. This company was sent to assist Montgomery, and after each party had mistaken the other for enemy troops, settled down facing Bir and **Takrouna**.

Other elements of 23 Battalion, collected by Lieutenant A. C. Marett<sup>39</sup> from the confusion still present in the valley, together with small parties from 28 Battalion which readily agreed to fit in with Thomas's plans, gradually came up to the foot of Cherachir and were incorporated into the scheme for all-round defence. By morning Thomas had his men well sited for an expected counter-attack, but none was delivered and the troops were able to fire at remaining pockets of infantry within range, paying particular attention to enemy weapon pits behind them on the northern slopes of Takrouna. Fortunately, as the battalion had no supporting arms, the enemy made no move with his tanks.

Takrouna itself remained in enemy hands. This feature now became the focus of the Division's effort, for without its capture it would have been very difficult to keep the ground captured by 6 NZ Brigade and on the east side of the feature itself, and the guns would have been hopelessly exposed.



### 5 BRIGADE SECTOR

Takrouna is in the left top corner, Djebel Bir (marked Bin) on the right. Djebel Cherachir is top right. The markings were made by the Brigadier after the attack and show the axes of advance of the 21, 23, and 28 Battalions



5 FIELD AMBULANCE ADS FOR THE TAKROUNA ATTACK  
in the field of barley and cactus

**5 FIELD AMBULANCE ADS FOR THE TAKROUNA ATTACK in the field of barley and cactus**

LOOKING NORTH FROM TAKROUNA  
Djebel Cherachir is beyond the road. In the left foreground is a corner of the lower village.



**SHELLFIRE NEAR 28 BATTALION RAP**



LOOKING SOUTH FROM TAKROUNA

Sgt. Rogers began his attack from the near corner of the olive orchards.

**LOOKING SOUTH FROM TAKROUNA**

**Sgt Rogers began his attack from the near corner of the olive orchards**

LOOKING NORTH FROM TAKROUNA

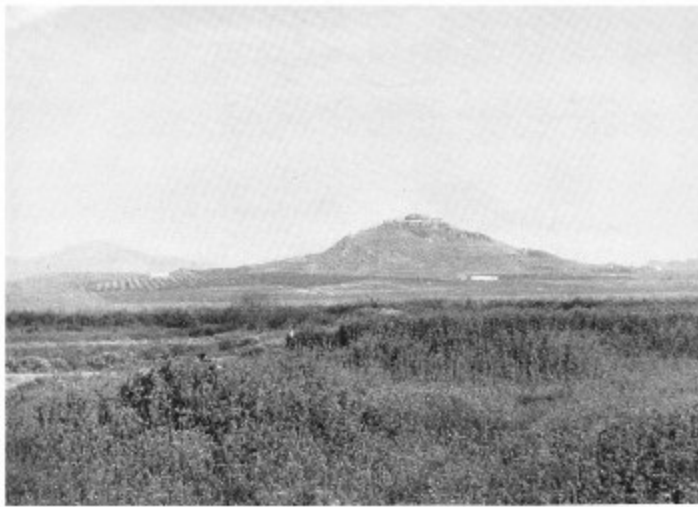
Djebel Cherachir is beyond the road. In the left foreground is a corner of the lower village.



**LOOKING NORTH FROM TAKROUNA**

**Djebel Cherachir is beyond the road. In the left foreground is a corner of the lower village**





TAKROUNA from the  
start line:

**TAKROUNA from the start line**



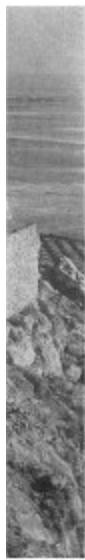
THE LEDGE from the  
Pinnacle

**THE LEDGE from the Pinnacle**

LOOKING ALONG THE LEDGE  
to the Pinnacle



**LOOKING ALONG THE LEDGE to the Pinnacle**



THE VILLAGE  
from the east face of  
the Pinnacle



**THE VILLAGE from the east face of the Pinnacle**



FROM TAKROUNA south-  
west to the 21 Battalion area

**FROM TAKROUNA south-west to the 21 Battalion area**



THE CLIFF FACE ON THE  
EAST SIDE OF THE PINNACLE

**THE CLIFF FACE ON THE EAST SIDE OF THE PINNACLE**



SHELL HOLE AT  
TAKROUNA made by  
17-pounder anti-tank gun



**SHELL HOLE AT TAKROUNA made by 17-pounder anti-tank gun**

AFTER THE BATTLE  
Group of 5 BRIGADE STAFF  
(left to right) Lt R. D. Hoggans,  
Lt I. H. Hirst, Capt W. J. G.  
Roach, Maj M. C. Fairbrother,  
Brig H. K. Kippenberger, Lt-Col  
R. W. Harding, Lt H. S. Wells  
(behind Harding), Capt J. H.  
Ensor, Col R. C. Queree, Rev.  
Fr. J. F. Henley (at rear), Capt  
E. D. Blundell



**AFTER THE BATTLE**

**Group of 5 BRIGADE STAFF**

***left to right*) Lt R. D. Hoggans, Lt I. H. Hirst, Capt W. J. G. Roach, Maj  
M C. Fairbrother, Brig H. K. Kippenberger, Lt-Col R. W. Harding, Lt H. S.  
Wells behind Harding), Capt J. H. Ensor, Col R. C. Queree, Rev. Fr. J. F.  
Henley (at rear), Capt E. D. Blundell**



CAPT W. B. THOMAS  
**CAPT W. B. THOMAS**



SGT H. MANAHI  
**SGT H. MANAHI**



SGT L. A. STEINER  
**SGT L. A. STEINER**



LT-COL C. M. BENNETT  
**LT-COL C. M. BENNETT**



CAPT A. F. HARDING  
**CAPT A. F. HARDING**



LT-COL R. E. ROMANS  
**LT-COL R. E. ROMANS**



# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## INITIAL ASSAULT ON TAKROUNA

## **INITIAL ASSAULT ON TAKROUNA**

**WHEN** two platoons from B Company, **28 Battalion**, had moved forward to the road, 10 Platoon had remained in a wadi at the foot of **Takrouna**. There were twelve men only, under Sergeant Rogers, now in command of the platoon, and Lance-Sergeant H. Manahi.<sup>40</sup> These two decided that their small force should be divided into two parties. Rogers would take one party up the south-east side of **Takrouna**, while Manahi worked round the front to attack up the south-west side. The two parties hoped to meet at the top, when further plans would be made to fit the circumstances. Just before a start was made, Captain S. F. Catchpole,<sup>41</sup> forward observation officer from **5 Field Regiment**, appeared with Sergeant W. J. Smith,<sup>42</sup> a stray from 23 Battalion. Smith attached himself to Rogers' party, a very valuable addition. Catchpole encouraged the Maoris to carry on and set to work to establish communications with his headquarters.

At dawn the two parties started their attack. Enemy fire of all types was still heavy, and a hail of mortar bombs sent the men running for shelter from rock to rock. But they ran forward and were soon among enemy positions. Rogers' party got to work with rifles, while Smith and Private K. Aranui<sup>43</sup> gained a ledge overlooking the trenches. More men from both parties were soon battling at close quarters against Italians in deep fighting pits, protected by screens of barbed wire hung with rattlers and other warning devices. Hand grenades, Bren guns, and bayonets were used and several weapon pits were silenced in turn. Some men broke right through, and from half-way up the hill soon convinced the enemy that they now had the upper hand. White flags appeared in quick succession from the defences circling the base of **Takrouna**, and 60 Italian prisoners were rounded up by Private H. Grant.<sup>44</sup>

Manahi took three men up a bare ridge that ended abruptly at a sheer rock face topped by stone buildings—the ledge. There was no opposition, a strange fact soon explained by Smith and Aranui. These two had already reached the rock face, up which they scrambled with

the aid of a cluster of telephone cables running to the now surrendered enemy positions below. They were confronted by a high stone wall. The cables again proved useful, and the two looked down into a small courtyard where a solitary German soldier operated a wireless set. Aranui leapt down and took him prisoner, and while he was being sent off down the hill an officer called out in English, offering to surrender, from a room opening off the courtyard. He was an artillery observation officer and had been observing from a window that covered the whole divisional front.

There followed one of those strange interludes of war. The officer surrendered to Smith, they smoked together, and the officer went off into captivity. More of the attackers arrived, and the whole area was explored. The men were on a narrow rock ledge, almost covered by a row of stone buildings. Smith saw an Italian ducking through the buildings and gave chase. The Italian eluded him, but Smith carried on up a flight of rough-hewn steps to find himself on the pinnacle. The steps had led up one of four rock faces enclosing an uneven platform from which rose stone buildings in a haphazard maze. Paths zigzagged through the buildings. Smith went through to the north side and saw, immediately below him, an untidy huddle of houses—the village of **Takrouna**.

Neither on ledge or pinnacle had there been any enemy interference; they had evidently relied on the defences at the foot of **Takrouna** and on the garrison in the village, for here Italian soldiers were moving round with apparent unconcern—until some shots from Smith scattered them.

Meanwhile Rogers and Manahi had decided that the best method of defending the pinnacle and ledge, for they expected an immediate counter-attack, would be to bar all access from the village. They blocked with a boulder the mouth of a tunnel bored through the rock to the bottom of the face enclosing the pinnacle, and Manahi himself occupied an Italian weapon pit overlooking the flight of crude stone steps that gave on to the path connecting pinnacle with ledge, continuing on below the rock face on the west side of the pinnacle to the village. Other Maoris, together with some stragglers from 23 Battalion whom Manahi

called up the hill, were placed in various vantage points covering the village itself and a steep wadi on the west side. By now it was mid-morning on 20 April.



ACCESS TO THE LEDGE WAS DIFFICULT  
ACCESS TO THE LEDGE WAS DIFFICULT

## *Reorganisation*

During this period the only link with the actual field of battle and Headquarters 5 Brigade, since the withdrawal of 21 Battalion, had been the wireless set with the 23 Battalion Adjutant, Captain A. Ross,<sup>45</sup> from a wadi between Bir and **Takrouna**. Ross had been able to tell the Brigadier something of the condition of **28 Battalion** and had estimated that part of 23 Battalion had got through to positions beyond the road. Early in the morning men could be seen on the top of **Takrouna** and it was thought that they were Maoris.

The two 6 Brigade battalions were well dug in with supporting arms up and communications established, and Brigadier Gentry was confident that they could resist any counter-attack. At dawn **Brigadier Kippenberger** had ordered the tanks of the Notts Yeomanry under his command to go forward on the east side of **Takrouna** to mop up and to find and help 23 Battalion. **General Freyberg** instructed the regiment of **8 Armoured Brigade** in reserve to clean out any pockets of the enemy between the two brigades, and then went forward to Headquarters 5



**At this stage Lieutenant Wikiriwhi, who had taken the triple role of commanding officer, adjutant, and intelligence officer of 28 Battalion, arrived at 5 Brigade Headquarters with the first definite news of his battalion. He had just witnessed the remarkable exploits of Private T. Heka <sup>47</sup> who, supported by two tanks at long range, had, quite alone, moved up Djebel Bir. A whirlwind series of 'engagements' resulted in the capture of an anti-tank gun and surviving crew, together with three machine-gun posts. Thus Wikiriwhi was able to report that Bir had been captured, to confirm that some men had reached the top of Takrouna, and that although the battalion had suffered heavy losses it was being reorganised. Brigadier Kippenberger gave him a definite line for reorganisation—stretching between Bir and Takrouna—to act as second line of defence should the enemy by-pass or break through 23 Battalion, concerning which there was no firm knowledge.**

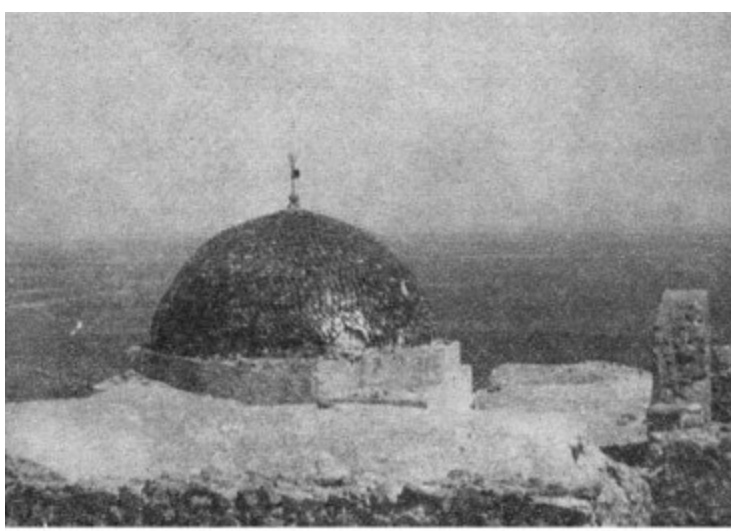
**At ten o'clock word was brought back from 23 Battalion on Cherachir. The Intelligence Officer, after a hazardous trip through the valley between Bir and Takrouna, then told the Brigade Commander of the events of the night attack and, which then interested him more, the situation of the battalion that morning. This was reasonably good, although no supporting arms could get through and ammunition was running short. Could artillery concentrations be put down on Point 136, where the enemy was seen collecting for the expected counter-attack?**

**With this information it was only a matter of minutes before an artillery programme was under way to the loudly expressed gratification of Thomas and his men. The tanks were given renewed instructions to push on to Cherachir, a difficult task owing to the many mines, and the supporting arms were told to get through. These latter could not move far, for no soft-skinned vehicles could survive the shellfire, and machine guns, anti-tank guns, and carriers had to give up after several unsuccessful attempts. The tanks eventually reached the Zaghuan road.**

By this time artillery observation officers, among them Captain J. C. Muirhead <sup>48</sup> from **5 Field Regiment** and an officer from an English medium regiment, had been to the top of **Takrouna**. From the information sent back by these officers it was debated at Headquarters **10 Corps**, and discussed with **General Freyberg**, whether the few troops on **Takrouna** should not be withdrawn, the whole feature heavily pounded by artillery, and a new assault launched that would clear the whole area, including the village and the northern slopes. Fortunately, for the effectiveness of artillery in steep, rocky country and among stone buildings is restricted, this policy was not adopted. **Brigadier Kippenberger** knew nothing of it. He still held to his decision to hold the ground that had been won, and with the intention of finding out himself what further support could be given to the forward troops, had gone up to the **28 Battalion** area and on to the lower slopes of **Takrouna**. The Brigade Commander concluded that the small group on **Takrouna** should be relieved by a platoon from **21 Battalion**, and instructions to this end were given to Colonel Harding shortly before midday. Some adjustments were made to the line on which **28 Battalion** was being reorganised.

During the afternoon **General Freyberg** again visited Headquarters **5 Brigade**, and on hearing the number of casualties—estimated at 40 for the Brigade at this stage—said that he would transfer the reserve battalion of **6 Brigade**. Accordingly, arrangements were made for **25 Battalion** to relieve **23 Battalion** on Cherachir during the coming night, the relief being completed without incident.

Little more could be done. The attack as a whole had not reached the planned objectives, as **4 Indian Division**, after a particularly bitter fight, had not managed to capture its first objective and had been left in a similar position to that of **5 NZ Brigade**. Obviously nothing further was possible in the meantime: it remained to tidy up the existing positions, and at all costs, with the artillery exposed in the open plain, to hold **Takrouna**.



THE DOME OF THE MOSQUE  
THE DOME OF THE MOSQUE

### *The Struggle Continues on Takrouna*

Meanwhile the small party on **Takrouna** had been receiving the concentrated attention of the enemy mortars and artillery. Heavy shelling of the feature began soon after the men had got into their positions, and continued throughout the day with little intermission. The Maoris were not daunted and engaged such targets as presented themselves. Lance-Corporal H. Ruha <sup>49</sup> so worried the crew of two captured 25-pounder guns with Bren fire from the dome of the mosque that they unsuccessfully attempted to withdraw from their positions on the northern slopes beyond the village. Private W. Takurua <sup>50</sup> fired all the ammunition he could find for an enemy 2-inch mortar slap into the village, and followed this up with a box of Italian stick grenades. All were busy.

In such a restricted area the men on **Takrouna** were very vulnerable to the enemy fire. Nebelwerfers had added to the devastation. Rogers was killed and five of the original party were early casualties, and soon Manahi realised that the area was practically undefended. He sent down the hill for reinforcements, and later went himself to collect some. Happily the enemy made no counter-attack during this period.

Manahi managed to find C Company, **28 Battalion**. Lieutenant Haig

gave him a section of riflemen, stretcher-bearers, food and ammunition, and Manahi returned with them to **Takrouna**, which was wreathed in the dust and smoke of bursting shells. On the way he met the officer from the Medium Regiment coming down, and was told that the feature was no longer tenable and that he should go back to his unit. The officer said, not knowing that this policy had been discarded, that **Takrouna** would be heavily pounded with artillery that afternoon as a prelude to a renewed attack. This left Manahi in a quandary, as he felt that a renewed attack would give the enemy time to get firmly lodged on pinnacle and ledge, previously undefended. At the bottom of the hill he spoke to Captain Catchpole, who had been in communication with his CO, Lieutenant-Colonel K. W. R. Glasgow,<sup>51</sup> and was told to take his men up and to hold on at all costs. Catchpole said, although he did not know it at the time, that reinforcements were on the way and that any artillery programme would be stopped. This was a critical moment.

Manahi went on. Again men were posted to cover all approaches to ledge and pinnacle. The relieving platoon from 21 Battalion arrived under Lieutenant Shaw at 3.30 p.m., and while the relief was taking place the long-expected counter-attack was launched. A pause in the shelling had been followed by the approach of a group of Italians coming directly from the village along the bottom of the face below the pinnacle. The ensuing struggle was bitter and ferocious. Manahi and Corporal J. P. Bell<sup>52</sup> dealt with a few who had broken through to the steps, mowing them down with machine-gun fire. Other Italians made more progress, forced a way on to the ledge and thoroughly aroused the Maoris by tossing hand grenades into a building sheltering wounded. Italians were shot, bayoneted, and pushed over the cliff during one of those grim moments when all control is lost.

In the midst of this pandemonium, Muirhead, who had been indulging in the rare spectacle of observing at close quarters the operations of an Italian cookhouse in the village immediately below the northern side of the pinnacle, charged down to the ledge. He had been on the way back from the far side of the pinnacle, had seen what was

going on, had collected two or three Maoris and put an end to the enemy attack in spectacular fashion, tommy guns blazing. The enemy withdrew, taking three Maori prisoners, and by nightfall both ledge and pinnacle were again in our hands. Most of the Maoris, now completely exhausted, returned to their battalion.

Shaw sent a note to Brigade, for no signals cables had withstood the heavy shellfire despite the gallant and constant endeavour of the Brigade signallers, explaining what had happened and asking for reinforcements. Another platoon from 21 Battalion was sent, taken from C Company under Lieutenant Hirst. This party arrived at nine in the evening.

Hardly had the reinforcements got into position before the enemy again attacked, taking the two platoons by surprise as they thought that all access routes were covered. The pinnacle was captured, and an attempt was made to clear the ledge. But the men were rallied and drove the enemy back to the pinnacle, where they occupied the mosque and adjacent buildings. A stalemate developed. Neither party could remove the other, each endeavour being frustrated by a shower of hand grenades and small-arms fire.

With daylight on the 21st the enemy took advantage of the extra height of the buildings on the pinnacle, and it was soon clear that it would be no easy task to dislodge them. Shaw was wounded while sniping from a gap in a wall, and Hirst took command. At the bottom of the hill the Brigade Commander ordered **28 Battalion** to send reinforcements—Manahi, if possible, and any others familiar with the layout of the buildings on **Takrouna**. Manahi responded magnificently and led about twelve men up to the ledge to join Hirst.

Hirst and Manahi then discussed the problem of driving the enemy from the pinnacle. Manahi tried to get the **28 Battalion** mortars from the flat below to bombard the building in which it was suspected that the enemy was concentrated, but the range was too great. Then an attempt was made to hit this building—within 10 yards of the ledge—

with a 2-inch mortar that had been brought up the hill. This, too, was unsuccessful as the range was too short. Captain A. F. Harding, <sup>53</sup> who then arrived to observe for **5 Field Regiment**, persuaded Hirst to allow him to try a 25-pounder gun, accepting the obvious risk of hitting the ledge instead of the building on the pinnacle. After an unsuccessful attempt to range directly on the building, Harding brought the fall of shot, lift by lift, up the southern slopes of the hill. Some fifty rounds were fired before the target was hit, and then three direct, penetrating hits were scored from the final ten rounds.

Immediately two parties from the ledge, one led by Manahi, the other by Sergeant I. Weepu, <sup>54</sup> went up to the pinnacle. The enemy had gone! A thorough investigation showed that he had left by the same mysterious means by which he had surprised the two platoons from 21 Battalion the night before—the tunnel giving on to the path to the village. Manahi remembered that he had forgotten to point out the tunnel during the relief.

The end was not yet, however, for the enemy was still firmly entrenched in the village and on the north-west slopes. It was approximately midday, and it seemed that the position was little better than on the previous day. There had been an improvement, for line communication had been re-established during the night and both Headquarters 5 Brigade and the supporting **5 Field Regiment** were in direct communication with the summit of **Takrouna**, an advantage that was soon apparent.

As soon as the enemy realised that the pinnacle had changed hands once more, both ledge and pinnacle were again subjected to heavy and continuous mortar fire. More casualties were suffered and movement became very dangerous. Harding immediately got his guns on to the mortars, some of which he could see firing from pits on the north-west slopes, while others were concealed behind the village. Altogether, more than three hundred rounds were fired before the mortars were finally silenced.



The village itself was a different proposition, not so easily dealt with. Perched on a narrow ridge, huddled close to the abrupt face of the pinnacle, it was a very difficult target. Yet Hirst believed that some softening was necessary, as all access routes were covered from solidly built stone houses that would afford complete protection against the small-arms fire of any attacking party. He rang Headquarters 5 Brigade in the middle of the afternoon to discuss the situation.

The Brigadier was up with **28 Battalion**, but the Brigade Major, **Major M. C. Fairbrother**,<sup>55</sup> after considering the possibility of getting a two-pounder anti-tank gun up the hill, decided to get one of the new 17-pounders to range on the village from its emplacement near Brigade Headquarters. The 17-pounder was still on the secret list, to be used in emergencies only. However, permission was obtained to use it, and the gun crew was soon briefed. The first shot landed on the roof of a building occupied by Hirst's men, drawing immediate and anxious objections, but soon the gun was sending its solid shells ricocheting through the village. The excited observers from the summit saw that the stone buildings gave little protection against this bombardment, and that the enemy had been reduced to panic.

The opportunity was promptly seized. The first move was made by Manahi and a group of Maoris. While the 17-pounder had been in action, Manahi and his men had been stalking enemy posts on the north-east slopes, dodging and creeping among the boulders, swift to use bayonet or grenade. Several weapon pits had been taken in turn and many prisoners captured, when Manahi noticed the effect of the 17-pounder on the enemy in the village. He believed that the plum was at last ripe for the plucking, and with several others made for the village.

The other movement was made by Hirst. **Brigadier Kippenberger**, with reserves now at his disposal since the relief of 23 Battalion and the reorganisation of 21 Battalion, had directed that a route should be reconnoitred to the village for an attack to be made by a company from 21 Battalion that night. Hirst had made this reconnaissance and had

returned to the pinnacle, where he came to the same conclusion as Manahi concerning the state of the enemy in the village. Taking a small party, he went right round to the north side of the village and began a house- to-house search, rounding up the enemy and driving them towards Manahi's party operating from the other side. The collapse of the enemy was complete. **Takrouna**, the scene of so much dogged fighting, so much individual gallantry and sacrifice, had fallen.

Below on the flat **Brigadier Kippenberger** heard the news with grim satisfaction. He had nursed the operation with all the means at his disposal and had given a war correspondent the chance of referring to him as 'red eyed and unshaven'. Later, messages of congratulation were received from General Horrocks, the Corps Commander, and **General Freyberg**. In the Division as a whole the men who had survived the struggle were regarded with something akin to awe. For two whole days and nights **Takrouna** had been hidden by the smoke and dust of the bloody battle, and strange stories of passages and secret entrances had circulated amongst the troops. Already, **Takrouna** and the battle there had become legend.



## EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

### [SECTION]

**WHEN** two platoons from B Company, **28 Battalion**, had moved forward to the road, 10 Platoon had remained in a wadi at the foot of **Takrouna**. There were twelve men only, under Sergeant Rogers, now in command of the platoon, and Lance-Sergeant H. Manahi.<sup>40</sup> These two decided that their small force should be divided into two parties. Rogers would take one party up the south-east side of **Takrouna**, while Manahi worked round the front to attack up the south-west side. The two parties hoped to meet at the top, when further plans would be made to fit the circumstances. Just before a start was made, Captain S. F. Catchpole,<sup>41</sup> forward observation officer from **5 Field Regiment**, appeared with Sergeant W. J. Smith,<sup>42</sup> a stray from 23 Battalion. Smith attached himself to Rogers' party, a very valuable addition. Catchpole encouraged the Maoris to carry on and set to work to establish communications with his headquarters.

At dawn the two parties started their attack. Enemy fire of all types was still heavy, and a hail of mortar bombs sent the men running for shelter from rock to rock. But they ran forward and were soon among enemy positions. Rogers' party got to work with rifles, while Smith and Private K. Aranui<sup>43</sup> gained a ledge overlooking the trenches. More men from both parties were soon battling at close quarters against Italians in deep fighting pits, protected by screens of barbed wire hung with rattlers and other warning devices. Hand grenades, Bren guns, and bayonets were used and several weapon pits were silenced in turn. Some men broke right through, and from half-way up the hill soon convinced the enemy that they now had the upper hand. White flags appeared in quick succession from the defences circling the base of **Takrouna**, and 60 Italian prisoners were rounded up by Private H. Grant.<sup>44</sup>

Manahi took three men up a bare ridge that ended abruptly at a sheer rock face topped by stone buildings—the ledge. There was no

opposition, a strange fact soon explained by Smith and Aranui. These two had already reached the rock face, up which they scrambled with the aid of a cluster of telephone cables running to the now surrendered enemy positions below. They were confronted by a high stone wall. The cables again proved useful, and the two looked down into a small courtyard where a solitary German soldier operated a wireless set. Aranui leapt down and took him prisoner, and while he was being sent off down the hill an officer called out in English, offering to surrender, from a room opening off the courtyard. He was an artillery observation officer and had been observing from a window that covered the whole divisional front.

There followed one of those strange interludes of war. The officer surrendered to Smith, they smoked together, and the officer went off into captivity. More of the attackers arrived, and the whole area was explored. The men were on a narrow rock ledge, almost covered by a row of stone buildings. Smith saw an Italian ducking through the buildings and gave chase. The Italian eluded him, but Smith carried on up a flight of rough-hewn steps to find himself on the pinnacle. The steps had led up one of four rock faces enclosing an uneven platform from which rose stone buildings in a haphazard maze. Paths zigzagged through the buildings. Smith went through to the north side and saw, immediately below him, an untidy huddle of houses—the village of **Takrouna**.

Neither on ledge or pinnacle had there been any enemy interference; they had evidently relied on the defences at the foot of **Takrouna** and on the garrison in the village, for here Italian soldiers were moving round with apparent unconcern—until some shots from Smith scattered them.

Meanwhile Rogers and Manahi had decided that the best method of defending the pinnacle and ledge, for they expected an immediate counter-attack, would be to bar all access from the village. They blocked with a boulder the mouth of a tunnel bored through the rock to the bottom of the face enclosing the pinnacle, and Manahi himself occupied an Italian weapon pit overlooking the flight of crude stone steps that gave on to the path connecting pinnacle with ledge, continuing on

**below the rock face on the west side of the pinnacle to the village. Other Maoris, together with some stragglers from 23 Battalion whom Manahi called up the hill, were placed in various vantage points covering the village itself and a steep wadi on the west side. By now it was mid-morning on 20 April.**



ACCESS TO THE LEDGE WAS DIFFICULT

ACCESS TO THE LEDGE WAS DIFFICULT

# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## REORGANISATION

### *Reorganisation*

During this period the only link with the actual field of battle and Headquarters 5 Brigade, since the withdrawal of 21 Battalion, had been the wireless set with the 23 Battalion Adjutant, Captain A. Ross,<sup>45</sup> from a wadi between Bir and **Takrouna**. Ross had been able to tell the Brigadier something of the condition of **28 Battalion** and had estimated that part of 23 Battalion had got through to positions beyond the road. Early in the morning men could be seen on the top of **Takrouna** and it was thought that they were Maoris.

The two 6 Brigade battalions were well dug in with supporting arms up and communications established, and Brigadier Gentry was confident that they could resist any counter-attack. At dawn **Brigadier Kippenberger** had ordered the tanks of the Notts Yeomanry under his command to go forward on the east side of **Takrouna** to mop up and to find and help 23 Battalion. **General Freyberg** instructed the regiment of **8 Armoured Brigade** in reserve to clean out any pockets of the enemy between the two brigades, and then went forward to Headquarters 5 Brigade with the CRA, Brigadier C. E. Weir.<sup>46</sup>

At this stage Lieutenant Wikiriwhi, who had taken the triple role of commanding officer, adjutant, and intelligence officer of **28 Battalion**, arrived at 5 Brigade Headquarters with the first definite news of his battalion. He had just witnessed the remarkable exploits of Private T. Heka<sup>47</sup> who, supported by two tanks at long range, had, quite alone, moved up **Djebel Bir**. A whirlwind series of 'engagements' resulted in the capture of an anti-tank gun and surviving crew, together with three machine-gun posts. Thus Wikiriwhi was able to report that Bir had been captured, to confirm that some men had reached the top of **Takrouna**, and that although the battalion had suffered heavy losses it was being reorganised. **Brigadier Kippenberger** gave him a definite line for

reorganisation—stretching between Bir and **Takrouna**—to act as second line of defence should the enemy by-pass or break through 23 Battalion, concerning which there was no firm knowledge.

At ten o'clock word was brought back from 23 Battalion on Cherachir. The Intelligence Officer, after a hazardous trip through the valley between Bir and **Takrouna**, then told the Brigade Commander of the events of the night attack and, which then interested him more, the situation of the battalion that morning. This was reasonably good, although no supporting arms could get through and ammunition was running short. Could artillery concentrations be put down on Point 136, where the enemy was seen collecting for the expected counter-attack?

With this information it was only a matter of minutes before an artillery programme was under way to the loudly expressed gratification of Thomas and his men. The tanks were given renewed instructions to push on to Cherachir, a difficult task owing to the many mines, and the supporting arms were told to get through. These latter could not move far, for no soft-skinned vehicles could survive the shellfire, and machine guns, anti-tank guns, and carriers had to give up after several unsuccessful attempts. The tanks eventually reached the **Zaghuan** road.

By this time artillery observation officers, among them Captain J. C. Muirhead <sup>48</sup> from **5 Field Regiment** and an officer from an English medium regiment, had been to the top of **Takrouna**. From the information sent back by these officers it was debated at Headquarters **10 Corps**, and discussed with **General Freyberg**, whether the few troops on **Takrouna** should not be withdrawn, the whole feature heavily pounded by artillery, and a new assault launched that would clear the whole area, including the village and the northern slopes. Fortunately, for the effectiveness of artillery in steep, rocky country and among stone buildings is restricted, this policy was not adopted. **Brigadier Kippenberger** knew nothing of it. He still held to his decision to hold the ground that had been won, and with the intention of finding out himself

what further support could be given to the forward troops, had gone up to the **28 Battalion** area and on to the lower slopes of **Takrouna**. The Brigade Commander concluded that the small group on **Takrouna** should be relieved by a platoon from 21 Battalion, and instructions to this end were given to Colonel Harding shortly before midday. Some adjustments were made to the line on which **28 Battalion** was being reorganised.

During the afternoon **General Freyberg** again visited Headquarters 5 Brigade, and on hearing the number of casualties—estimated at 40 for the Brigade at this stage—said that he would transfer the reserve battalion of 6 Brigade. Accordingly, arrangements were made for 25 Battalion to relieve 23 Battalion on Cherachir during the coming night, the relief being completed without incident.

Little more could be done. The attack as a whole had not reached the planned objectives, as 4 Indian Division, after a particularly bitter fight, had not managed to capture its first objective and had been left in a similar position to that of 5 NZ Brigade. Obviously nothing further was possible in the meantime: it remained to tidy up the existing positions, and at all costs, with the artillery exposed in the open plain, to hold **Takrouna**.



THE DOME OF THE MOSQUE  
THE DOME OF THE MOSQUE

# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## THE STRUGGLE CONTINUES ON TAKROUNA

### *The Struggle Continues on Takrouna*

Meanwhile the small party on **Takrouna** had been receiving the concentrated attention of the enemy mortars and artillery. Heavy shelling of the feature began soon after the men had got into their positions, and continued throughout the day with little intermission. The Maoris were not daunted and engaged such targets as presented themselves. Lance-Corporal H. Ruha <sup>49</sup> so worried the crew of two captured 25-pounder guns with Bren fire from the dome of the mosque that they unsuccessfully attempted to withdraw from their positions on the northern slopes beyond the village. Private W. Takuraa <sup>50</sup> fired all the ammunition he could find for an enemy 2-inch mortar slap into the village, and followed this up with a box of Italian stick grenades. All were busy.

In such a restricted area the men on **Takrouna** were very vulnerable to the enemy fire. Nebelwerfers had added to the devastation. Rogers was killed and five of the original party were early casualties, and soon Manahi realised that the area was practically undefended. He sent down the hill for reinforcements, and later went himself to collect some. Happily the enemy made no counter-attack during this period.

Manahi managed to find C Company, **28 Battalion**. Lieutenant Haig gave him a section of riflemen, stretcher-bearers, food and ammunition, and Manahi returned with them to **Takrouna**, which was wreathed in the dust and smoke of bursting shells. On the way he met the officer from the Medium Regiment coming down, and was told that the feature was no longer tenable and that he should go back to his unit. The officer said, not knowing that this policy had been discarded, that **Takrouna** would be heavily pounded with artillery that afternoon as a prelude to a renewed attack. This left Manahi in a quandary, as he felt that a renewed attack would give the enemy time to get firmly lodged on



**pinnacle and ledge, previously undefended. At the bottom of the hill he spoke to Captain Catchpole, who had been in communication with his CO, Lieutenant-Colonel K. W. R. Glasgow,<sup>51</sup> and was told to take his men up and to hold on at all costs. Catchpole said, although he did not know it at the time, that reinforcements were on the way and that any artillery programme would be stopped. This was a critical moment.**

**Manahi went on. Again men were posted to cover all approaches to ledge and pinnacle. The relieving platoon from 21 Battalion arrived under Lieutenant Shaw at 3.30 p.m., and while the relief was taking place the long-expected counter-attack was launched. A pause in the shelling had been followed by the approach of a group of Italians coming directly from the village along the bottom of the face below the pinnacle. The ensuing struggle was bitter and ferocious. Manahi and Corporal J. P. Bell<sup>52</sup> dealt with a few who had broken through to the steps, mowing them down with machine-gun fire. Other Italians made more progress, forced a way on to the ledge and thoroughly aroused the Maoris by tossing hand grenades into a building sheltering wounded. Italians were shot, bayoneted, and pushed over the cliff during one of those grim moments when all control is lost.**

**In the midst of this pandemonium, Muirhead, who had been indulging in the rare spectacle of observing at close quarters the operations of an Italian cookhouse in the village immediately below the northern side of the pinnacle, charged down to the ledge. He had been on the way back from the far side of the pinnacle, had seen what was going on, had collected two or three Maoris and put an end to the enemy attack in spectacular fashion, tommy guns blazing. The enemy withdrew, taking three Maori prisoners, and by nightfall both ledge and pinnacle were again in our hands. Most of the Maoris, now completely exhausted, returned to their battalion.**

**Shaw sent a note to Brigade, for no signals cables had withstood the heavy shellfire despite the gallant and constant endeavour of the Brigade signallers, explaining what had happened and asking for**



reinforcements. Another platoon from 21 Battalion was sent, taken from C Company under Lieutenant Hirst. This party arrived at nine in the evening.

Hardly had the reinforcements got into position before the enemy again attacked, taking the two platoons by surprise as they thought that all access routes were covered. The pinnacle was captured, and an attempt was made to clear the ledge. But the men were rallied and drove the enemy back to the pinnacle, where they occupied the mosque and adjacent buildings. A stalemate developed. Neither party could remove the other, each endeavour being frustrated by a shower of hand grenades and small-arms fire.

With daylight on the 21st the enemy took advantage of the extra height of the buildings on the pinnacle, and it was soon clear that it would be no easy task to dislodge them. Shaw was wounded while sniping from a gap in a wall, and Hirst took command. At the bottom of the hill the Brigade Commander ordered **28 Battalion** to send reinforcements—Manahi, if possible, and any others familiar with the layout of the buildings on **Takrouna**. Manahi responded magnificently and led about twelve men up to the ledge to join Hirst.

Hirst and Manahi then discussed the problem of driving the enemy from the pinnacle. Manahi tried to get the **28 Battalion** mortars from the flat below to bombard the building in which it was suspected that the enemy was concentrated, but the range was too great. Then an attempt was made to hit this building—within 10 yards of the ledge—with a 2-inch mortar that had been brought up the hill. This, too, was unsuccessful as the range was too short. Captain A. F. Harding,<sup>53</sup> who then arrived to observe for **5 Field Regiment**, persuaded Hirst to allow him to try a 25-pounder gun, accepting the obvious risk of hitting the ledge instead of the building on the pinnacle. After an unsuccessful attempt to range directly on the building, Harding brought the fall of shot, lift by lift, up the southern slopes of the hill. Some fifty rounds were fired before the target was hit, and then three direct, penetrating hits were scored from the final ten rounds.

Immediately two parties from the ledge, one led by Manahi, the other by Sergeant I. Weepu, <sup>54</sup> went up to the pinnacle. The enemy had gone! A thorough investigation showed that he had left by the same mysterious means by which he had surprised the two platoons from 21 Battalion the night before—the tunnel giving on to the path to the village. Manahi remembered that he had forgotten to point out the tunnel during the relief.

The end was not yet, however, for the enemy was still firmly entrenched in the village and on the north-west slopes. It was approximately midday, and it seemed that the position was little better than on the previous day. There had been an improvement, for line communication had been re-established during the night and both Headquarters 5 Brigade and the supporting 5 Field Regiment were in direct communication with the summit of Takrouna, an advantage that was soon apparent.

As soon as the enemy realised that the pinnacle had changed hands once more, both ledge and pinnacle were again subjected to heavy and continuous mortar fire. More casualties were suffered and movement became very dangerous. Harding immediately got his guns on to the mortars, some of which he could see firing from pits on the north-west slopes, while others were concealed behind the village. Altogether, more than three hundred rounds were fired before the mortars were finally silenced.

The village itself was a different proposition, not so easily dealt with. Perched on a narrow ridge, huddled close to the abrupt face of the pinnacle, it was a very difficult target. Yet Hirst believed that some softening was necessary, as all access routes were covered from solidly built stone houses that would afford complete protection against the small-arms fire of any attacking party. He rang Headquarters 5 Brigade in the middle of the afternoon to discuss the situation.

The Brigadier was up with 28 Battalion, but the Brigade Major, Major

**M. C. Fairbrother,** <sup>55</sup> after considering the possibility of getting a two-pounder anti-tank gun up the hill, decided to get one of the new 17-pounders to range on the village from its emplacement near Brigade Headquarters. The 17-pounder was still on the secret list, to be used in emergencies only. However, permission was obtained to use it, and the gun crew was soon briefed. The first shot landed on the roof of a building occupied by Hirst's men, drawing immediate and anxious objections, but soon the gun was sending its solid shells ricocheting through the village. The excited observers from the summit saw that the stone buildings gave little protection against this bombardment, and that the enemy had been reduced to panic.

The opportunity was promptly seized. The first move was made by Manahi and a group of Maoris. While the 17-pounder had been in action, Manahi and his men had been stalking enemy posts on the north-east slopes, dodging and creeping among the boulders, swift to use bayonet or grenade. Several weapon pits had been taken in turn and many prisoners captured, when Manahi noticed the effect of the 17-pounder on the enemy in the village. He believed that the plum was at last ripe for the plucking, and with several others made for the village.

The other movement was made by Hirst. **Brigadier Kippenberger**, with reserves now at his disposal since the relief of 23 Battalion and the reorganisation of 21 Battalion, had directed that a route should be reconnoitred to the village for an attack to be made by a company from 21 Battalion that night. Hirst had made this reconnaissance and had returned to the pinnacle, where he came to the same conclusion as Manahi concerning the state of the enemy in the village. Taking a small party, he went right round to the north side of the village and began a house- to-house search, rounding up the enemy and driving them towards Manahi's party operating from the other side. The collapse of the enemy was complete. **Takrouna**, the scene of so much dogged fighting, so much individual gallantry and sacrifice, had fallen.

Below on the flat **Brigadier Kippenberger** heard the news with grim

satisfaction. He had nursed the operation with all the means at his disposal and had given a war correspondent the chance of referring to him as 'red eyed and unshaven'. Later, messages of congratulation were received from General Horrocks, the Corps Commander, and **General Freyberg**. In the Division as a whole the men who had survived the struggle were regarded with something akin to awe. For two whole days and nights **Takrouna** had been hidden by the smoke and dust of the bloody battle, and strange stories of passages and secret entrances had circulated amongst the troops. Already, **Takrouna** and the battle there had become legend.

# EPIISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## CONCLUSION

## CONCLUSION

**TAKROUNA** was garrisoned by a company from 21 Battalion under Captain Roach and was firmly held during the ensuing operations at **Enfidaville**. Roach, who had been up to the west side of **Takrouna** during the day looking for wounded from 21 Battalion, and who had directed the artillery on to enemy positions still in that area, had been at Headquarters 5 Brigade to get instructions for the night attack now cancelled. This final task, the garrisoning of **Takrouna**, was fitting climax to forty-eight hours of unceasing effort.

The final objectives of the **Takrouna** battle were not captured until the end of the war in **Africa**, but **Takrouna** itself became the key to the firm line held by **Eighth Army** while the final blows were delivered by **First Army** in the north. The action of 5 Brigade provides a fruitful field for the study of soldiers on the battlefield. It is clear that the burden of fighting is not shared by all—some lack the necessary spirit, some the required skill. All, however, are necessary to give expression to the outstanding qualities of those who direct and wage the battle: qualities of firm leadership, of sound infantry craftsmanship, of determination, and of sustained courage.

During the critical stages of the first night of the battle the necessity for flexible command was demonstrated. The losses on the west side of **Takrouna** were cut and all effort was concentrated on the east side, exploiting the uncertain measure of success in that sector. From that moment the attack became the battle for **Takrouna**, the vital ground. From near-disaster **Takrouna** was wrested to the lasting glory of the troops engaged.

**General Freyberg** called the battle the hardest operation in the North African campaign. Brigadier Weir, the CRA, when commenting on the battle, said ‘... it is a wonderful story of infantry doggedness, skill, and bravery’. It was not, however, a cheap victory, as the following casualties suffered by 5 Brigade will show. The figures represent killed, wounded, and missing, and the assaulting strengths of the battalions are

given in brackets.

UNIT	OFFICERS	OTHER RANKS
21 Bn	7 (19)	164 (341)
23 Bn	8 (20)	108 (363)
28 (Maori) Bn	12 (17)	104 (302)
32 A Tk Bty	1	2
2 MG Coy	3	5
4 MG Coy	-	2
7 Fd Coy, NZE	-	1
25 Bn	3	39
	—	—
	34	425

During the action 5 Brigade had captured 732 prisoners, 164 of these being German. The enemy units identified had been from **Trieste** and **Folgore** Divisions, and from 104 and 47 Panzer Grenadier Regiments. On the **Takrouna** feature itself the enemy equipment captured included two British 25-pounders, one 50-millimetre anti-tank gun, nine 20-millimetre Bredas, 72 heavy and 50 light machine guns, six mortars, and four motor vehicles. This tally did not include the enemy equipment destroyed during the battle.

The enemy, too, regarded the battle as an epic feat of arms, as the following translation will show:

*Extract from Report by General Messe, Commander 1 Army (German-Italian), on the Battle of **Enfidaville**, April 1943*

.... When I had inspected our defensive system I had immediately seen the importance which **Takrouna** hill could have in the general defensive scheme, though far advanced and almost detached from the main positions. I planned to make it an independent strongpoint whose function would be to break the first impetus of the enemy attack and divert it towards the re-entrants in the coastal and central sectors. I therefore gave orders for the small amount of material available to be used to strengthen the natural defences of this rock, and for enough

**food and ammunition to be dumped there to enable the garrison to hold out for a long time even if completely surrounded. I was certain that the defenders of such an outpost needed great tenacity and will to resist, and so in an endeavour to rouse the spirit of emulation I included a platoon of Germans in the garrison, gave orders to hold out to the last, and issued a statement to the German-Italian battle group entrusting the outpost to their honour as soldiers.**

**I reproduce here a letter I received from General La Ferla (commander of Trieste Division) on 18 April:**

*To His Excellency General Messe, 1 Army Commander*

**This morning, in your name and the name of the Motherland, in the presence of representatives of the **Takrouna** garrison, I handed over the German and Italian troops of the garrison to the outpost commander, who gave his oath that **Takrouna** would be defended to the last man, according to your orders.**

**(Signed) La Ferla**

**The Takrouna garrison comprised 1/66 Infantry Regiment and the German platoon mentioned above, a troop of 65-millimetre guns, and one of captured 25-pounder guns of 16 Artillery Regiment.**

**The enemy's preliminary barrage was terrific. It lasted from 11 p.m. on 19 April until 6 a.m. next morning, when enemy infantry moved to the attack against **Takrouna**, **Djebel Bir**, **Djebel Cherachir**, and **Djebel Froukr**, supported by tanks.**

**The attack was so violent, and supported so strongly by continual waves of fresh troops, that the German strongpoint of **Djebel Bir** was overrun after a vigorous resistance. By its fall the enemy was assured of a jumping-off place from which to attack the height of **Takrouna** from the south-east. But our defenders, nobly supported by their own, the Corps and Army artillery, held firm against the tide which surged against the hill from the south-east and south-west. In the latter**



**direction our accurate machine-gun fire mowed down the enemy ranks.**

**About 9 a.m., after a violent hand-to-hand struggle, our positions on the south-east of the height were overrun. The enemy then infiltrated on to the top of the mountain and into the tiny village which dominated it. Our battalion commander led a few men of his headquarters in counter-attacks to drive the attackers out.**

**This situation would have been untenable in face of the great numbers of the enemy still moving up (almost the entire 2 NZ Division) if fresh forces had not been on their way up to **Takrouna**. Folgore Battalion arrived to help us, having run the gauntlet of terrific shellfire on the way. Its grenadier company was the first to arrive, about 2 p.m., and then the other two companies of parachutists arrived about 4 p.m.**

**Moving with the vigour characteristic of our best shock troops, Folgore Battalion dislodged the enemy from house after house, pushed him back from rock to rock, hurled him down off the precipices on the eastern side of the mountain, and retook all the lost positions. The mopping-up took many hours, and not until nearly dawn on 21 April could the situation be regarded as completely restored.**

**But the enemy did not cease his efforts to occupy **Takrouna**. Another violent barrage was fired, followed by new attacks by fresh troops.**

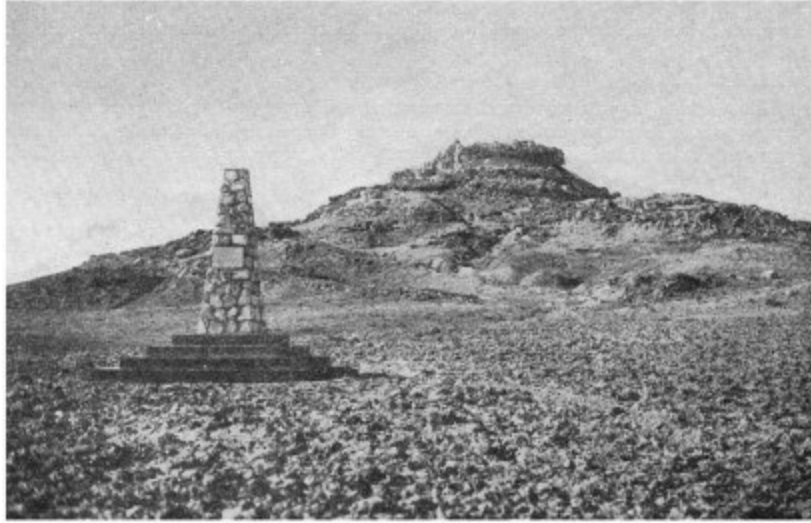
**From 5 p.m. that day the furious struggle on the mountain was carried on more at random than with any sort of direction, as all direct contact was lost, but there was no let-up in the fighting.**

**The same enemy who had at first advertised his capture of the outpost, and then contradicted his own words, was now puzzled to find such fierce resistance by every little group of our men, who preferred death to surrender.**

**The struggle went on from episode to episode all day on 22 April and all the night of 22-23 April. Not until the early hours of the 23rd did the enemy gain the mastery of the situation.**

**But at what a cost! The enemy himself admitted that his casualties were enormous, and that he actually did not have the troops available to launch any more attacks.**

**The battle in the **Takrouna** sector was over ....**



**MEMORIAL BUILT BY THE FRENCH AT TAKROUNA**  
**MEMORIAL BUILT BY THE FRENCH AT TAKROUNA**

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# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

### *BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES*

<sup>1</sup>Brig W. G. GENTRY, CBE, DSO and bar, m.i.d., MC (Gk), US Bronze Star; Lower Hutt; born London, 20 Feb 1899; Regular soldier; GSO II 2 NZ Div, 1940; AA & QMG, 1940–41; GSO I Nov 1941-Sep 1942; commanded 6 NZ Inf Bde Sep 1942-Apr 1943; Deputy Chief of the General Staff (NZ) 1943–44; comd 9 NZ Bde ( Italy) Feb 1945-Jan 1946; DCGS Jul 1946-Nov 1947; Adjutant-General I Apr 1949.

<sup>2</sup> Maj-Gen Sir Howard K. KIPPENBERGER, KBE, CB, DSO and bar, ED, m.i.d., Legion of Merit (US); Wellington; born Ladbrooks, 28 Jan 1897; barrister and solicitor; 1 NZEF 1916–17; wounded Mar 1917; CO 20 Bn 1939–41; comd 10 Inf Bde ( Crete) May 1941; comd 5 NZ Inf Bde 1942–44; comd 2 NZ Div 30 Apr-14 May 1943 and 9 Feb-2 Mar 1944; twice wounded; comd 2 NZEF PW Repatriation Unit ( UK) 1944–45; Editor-in-Chief, NZ War Histories.

<sup>3</sup>Lt-Col C. M. BENNETT, DSO; Wellington; born Rotorua, 27 Jul 1913; radio announcer; CO 28 (Maori) Bn Nov 1942-Apr 1943; wounded 20 Apr 1943.

<sup>4</sup>Brig R. W. HARDING, DSO, MM, ED; Kirikopuni, North Auckland; born Dargaville, 29 Feb 1896; farmer; CO 21 Bn 1942–43; comd 5 Bde 30 Apr-14 May 1943 and 4 Jun-23 Aug 1943; twice wounded; comd 1 Inf Bde (Territorial).

<sup>5</sup>Lt-Col R. E. ROMANS, DSO, m.i.d.; born Arrowtown; business manager, CO 23 Bn 1942–43; twice wounded; died of wounds 19 Dec 1943.

<sup>6</sup>Maj W. PORTER, MC and bar; Pupuke, North Auckland; born Taumarere, 23 Aug 1915; taxi driver; wounded 20 Apr 1943.

<sup>7</sup>Cape W. M. AWARAU; Hawera; born NZ, 28 Sep 1904; barrister and solicitor; twice wounded.

- <sup>8</sup>Capt W. Te A. HAIG, m.i.d.; Ruatoria; born Waipiro Bay, Ruatoria, 14 Nov 1904; clerk.
- <sup>9</sup>Maj C. SORENSON; Whangarei; born Auckland, 5 Jun 1917; school teacher; twice wounded.
- <sup>10</sup>Capt M. WIKIRIWHI, DSO, MC, m.i.d.; Taneatua; born Rotorua, 4 Apr 1918; labourer; twice wounded.
- <sup>11</sup>Maj W. P. ANARU; Rotorua; born NZ, 27 Feb 1905; civil servant; wounded 20 Apr 1943.
- <sup>12</sup>Sgt T. TRAINOR, MM; born Ruatoki, 15 Feb 1919; carpenter; died of wounds 24 May 1944.
- <sup>13</sup>Sgt J. ROGERS; born NZ, 29 Dec 1916; school teacher; killed in action 20 Apr 1943.
- <sup>14</sup>Capt P. F. Te H. ORNBERG, MC, m.i.d.; born NZ, 2 Apr 1919; clerk; wounded 20 Apr 1943; died of wounds 30 May 1944.
- <sup>15</sup>Maj B. M. LAIRD, ED; Auckland; born Rotorua, 5 Jul 1904; school teacher.
- <sup>16</sup>Capt R. A. SHAW; Taumarunui; born New Plymouth, 8 Jun 1912; commercial traveller; twice wounded.
- <sup>17</sup>Maj D. J. ASHLEY, m.i.d.; Auckland; born Auckland, 20 Feb 1912; draper.
- <sup>18</sup>Lt I. H. HIRST, MC; Auckland; born Auckland, 15 Feb 1915; farmer; wounded 3 Sep 1942.
- <sup>19</sup>Capt G. A. H. BULLOCK-DOUGLAS; Hawera; born Wanganui, 4 Jun 1911; bank officer; twice wounded.
- <sup>20</sup>Maj W. J. G. ROACH, MC; Suva; born Levin, 12 Oct 1909; bank officer; wounded 22 Nov 1941.
- <sup>21</sup>Capt J. C. CHALMERS; Auckland; born Greymouth, 8 Feb 1914; school

teacher.

<sup>22</sup>2 Lt L. A. STEINER, DCM; born NZ, 4 Mar 1918; farmhand; killed in action 24 Sep 1944.

<sup>23</sup>Lt R. DONALDSON; born NZ, 14 Apr 1921; Regular soldier; killed in action 20 Apr 1943.

<sup>24</sup>Lt G. M. TAYLOR; born Walton, 23 Aug 1910; carrier; killed in action 20 Apr 1943.

<sup>25</sup>L-Cpl A. T. LUXFORD, MM; **Rotorua**; born Walhalla, Victoria, 25 May 1915; timber worker; wounded 26 Nov 1941; wounded and p.w. 20 Apr 1943; released May 1943.

<sup>26</sup>L-Sgt L. N. PARRIS, MM; **Auckland**; born **Auckland**, 15 Dec 1915; grocer; three times wounded.

<sup>27</sup>2 Lt J. T. UPTON; born NZ, 11 Aug 1917; clerk; killed in action 20 Apr 1943.

<sup>28</sup>Capt I. A. MURRAY; born **Wanganui**, 9 Aug 1917; Regular soldier; twice wounded; killed in action 20 Apr 1943.

<sup>29</sup>Lt-Col W. B. THOMAS, DSO, MC and bar, m.i.d., US Silver Star; **London**; born **Nelson**, 29 Jun 1918; bank officer; CO 23 Bn 1944–45; twice wounded; wounded and p.w., **Crete**, May 1941; escaped **Salonika**, Nov 1941; returned to unit May 1942; Hampshire Regt, 1947.

<sup>30</sup>Lt A. F. BAILEY, MC; **Christchurch**; born NZ, 22 Jan 1913; window dresser; wounded 23 Oct 1942.

<sup>31</sup>Maj A. S. ROBINS, MC; **Queenstown**; born **Queenstown**, 4 Aug 1917; shepherd; wounded 20 Apr 1943.

<sup>32</sup>Capt S. WILSON, ED, m.i.d.; born NZ, 23 Dec 1903; french polisher; twice wounded; died 4 Jun 1949.

<sup>33</sup>Capt H. C. BLACK; born NZ, 29 Aug 1917; warehouseman; killed in

**action 20 Apr 1943.**

**<sup>34</sup>2 Lt F. J. MUIR, MM; born NZ, 8 Feb 1915; clerk; killed in action 16 Mar 1944.**

**<sup>35</sup>WO II W. S. SMELLIE; Dunedin; born Dunedin, 24 Dec 1907; stock buyer; wounded 9 May 1943.**

**<sup>36</sup>Sgt W. D. DAWSON; [Washington](#); born Dunedin, 1 Nov 1920; student.**

**<sup>37</sup>Maj C. A. SLEE, m.i.d.; born Westport; clerk; died of wounds 5 Apr 1944.**

**<sup>38</sup>Maj H. MONTGOMERY; [Ashburton](#); born Carmunnock, [Scotland](#), 25 May 1907; technical school teacher.**

**<sup>39</sup>Maj A. C. MARETT, MC; Dunedin; born Dunedin, 5 Aug 1916; warehouseman; wounded 25 Oct 1942.**

**<sup>40</sup>Sgt H. MANAHI, DCM; [Rotorua](#); born Ohinemutu, 28 Sep 1913; labourer; wounded 23 May 1941.**

**<sup>41</sup>Maj S. F. CATCHPOLE, MC, m.i.d.; [Auckland](#); born [Huntly](#), 12 Apr 1916; salesman.**

**<sup>42</sup>2 Lt W. J. SMITH, DCM; [Lower Hutt](#); born [Timaru](#), 24 Sep 1917; labourer; wounded 26 May 1941.**

**<sup>43</sup>Pte K. ARANUI; [Rotorua](#); born [Rotorua](#), 6 Oct 1914; labourer.**

**<sup>44</sup>Lt H. GRANT, MM; [Rotorua](#); born Mourea, [Rotorua](#), 9 Jul 1921; chainman; twice wounded.**

**<sup>45</sup>Maj A. ROSS, MC and bar, m.i.d., Order of Valour (Gk); Dunedin; born Herbert, North Otago, 19 Jul 1911; University lecturer; Brigade Major 5 Inf Bde, Aug-Dec 1944; four times wounded.**

**<sup>46</sup>Maj-Gen C. E. WEIR, CB, CBE, DSO and bar, m.i.d.; [London](#); born NZ, 5 Oct 1905; Regular soldier; [CO 6 Fd Regt](#) 1940–41; [CRA 2 NZ Div](#) 1941–44; [GOC 2 NZ Div](#) 4 Sep-17 Oct 1944; [GOC 46 \(Brit\) Inf Div](#) 1944–46;**

**Commandant, Southern Military District, 1948–49.**

**<sup>47</sup>Pte T. HEKA, DCM; Awanui, North Auckland; born NZ, 15 Nov 1915; labourer.**

**<sup>48</sup>Maj J. C. MUIRHEAD, MC; Palmerston North; born Palmerston North, 5 Oct 1911; clerk; wounded 23 Nov 1941.**

**<sup>49</sup>L-Sgt H. RUHA, MM; born NZ, 12 Jul 1919; bushman; died of wounds 21 Apr 1943.**

**<sup>50</sup>Pte W. ; Wellington; born Picton, 24 Feb 1908; clerk.**

**<sup>51</sup>Col K. W. R. , DSO, ED, m.i.d.; Wellington; born Wellington, 15 Nov 1902; head-master; CO 14 Lt AA Regt 1941; CO 5 Fd Regt 1941–43; OC Troops 6 NZ Div, May-Aug 1943; GSO I NZ Maadi Camp 1944; Rector, Scots College, Wellington.**

**<sup>52</sup>L-Cpl J. P. BELL; Te Awamutu; born Taumarunui, 16 Feb 1918; labourer.**

**<sup>53</sup>Maj A. F. HARDING, MC; Wellington; born Wanganui, 27 Nov 1916; accountant; wounded 25 Nov 1941.**

**<sup>54</sup>WO II I. WEEPU, MM; Wellington; born NZ, 19 Dec 1910; labourer; twice wounded.**

**<sup>55</sup> Col M. C. FAIRBROTHER, DSO, OBE, ED, m.i.d.; Wellington; born Carterton, 21 Sep 1907; accountant; BM 5 Inf Bde 1942–43; commanded in turn 21, 23, and 28 (Maori) Bus, Apr-Dec 1943; GSO II 2 NZ Div, Jun-Oct 1944; CO 26 Bn 1944–45; Associate Editor, NZ War Histories.**

**The occupations given in each case are those on enlistment**



# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

**THIS ACCOUNT is based on the war diaries and official documents of 2 New Zealand Division, supplemented by material from officers and men who served with the units concerned. The author is indebted to all those who supplied information so freely and so patiently. The map is by L. D. McCormick, and the sketch on page 4 is by J. P. Snadden. The photographs come from many collections, which are stated where they are known:**

**K. G. Killoh Cover, page 14 ( top), page 17 ( bottom), page 18 ( top), page 19 ( bottom) and page 22**

**Royal Air Force page 13**

**Dr. C. N. D'Arcy page 14 ( bottom), page 20 ( bottom right)**

**New Zealand Army Official, M. D. Elias page 15 ( top), page 16 ( bottom), and page 18 ( bottom)**

**J. C. Muirhead page 15 ( bottom) and page 19 ( top)**

**J. C. White page 16 ( top)**

**Father J. L. Kingan page 17 ( top)**

**New Zealand Army Official, G. R. Bull page 20 ( top)**

**Spencer Digby page 20 ( bottom left)**

**General A. Juin page 30**

# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## [BACKMATTER]

The author, **I. McL. Wards**, who is on the staff of the **War History Branch**, was a student at **Canterbury University College** before the war, and served in the **Middle East** and in **Italy** with the **36th New Zealand Survey Battery**. He graduated **MA in History** at **Victoria University College** in **1949**.

# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## [BACKMATTER]

THE TYPE USED THROUGHOUT THE SERIES IS *Aldine Bembo* WHICH WAS REVIVED FOR MONOTYPE FROM A RARE BOOK PRINTED BY ALDUS IN 1495 \* THE TEXT IS SET IN 12 POINT ON A BODY OF 14 POINT

# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## COASTWATCHERS

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# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## [COVERS]

NEW ZEALAND IN THE SECOND WORLD WAR  
Official History



## COASTWATCHERS

The illustrations by G. C. Hill appeared in *Illustrations and Documents* of the Department of Internal Affairs, 1945. The illustrations of the coastwatchers are from the *Official History of the New Zealand Army in the Second World War*, and the illustration of the coastwatchers is from the *Official History of the New Zealand Army*.

Illustrations by G. C. Hill  
THE NEW ZEALAND ARMY  
THE NEW ZEALAND AIR FORCE  
THE NEW ZEALAND NAVY  
THE NEW ZEALAND MARINE CORPS  
THE NEW ZEALAND ENGINEERS  
THE NEW ZEALAND ARTILLERY  
THE NEW ZEALAND TANK BATTALION  
THE NEW ZEALAND CANTONMENT ENGINEERS  
THE NEW ZEALAND MEDICAL SERVICES  
THE NEW ZEALAND VETERINARY SERVICES  
THE NEW ZEALAND SIGNAL SERVICES  
THE NEW ZEALAND TRANSPORT SERVICES  
THE NEW ZEALAND POST AND TELEGRAPH SERVICES  
THE NEW ZEALAND POLICE  
THE NEW ZEALAND CUSTOMS AND EXCISE  
THE NEW ZEALAND FIREARMS  
THE NEW ZEALAND DEFENCE FORCE  
THE NEW ZEALAND DEFENCE FORCE  
THE NEW ZEALAND DEFENCE FORCE

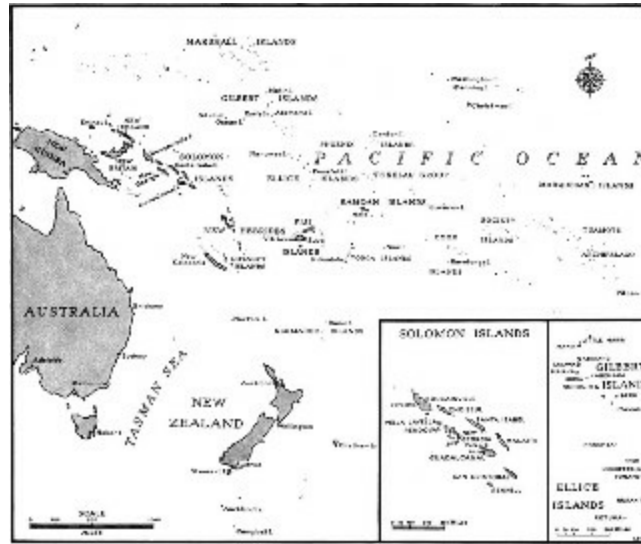
## COASTWATCHERS

D. O. W. HALL

WAR HISTORY BRANCH  
DEPARTMENT OF INTERNAL AFFAIRS  
WELLINGTON, NEW ZEALAND  
1951

# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## [FRONTISPIECE]



THE PACIFIC  
**THE PACIFIC**

### COVER PHOTOGRAPHS

( *top left*) Cape Terawhiti, New Zealand

( *top right*) Lieutenant D. L. Vaughan at **Funafuti**

( *bottom*) Camouflaged, radar station, Lombari, off **Munda, New Georgia**

**EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2**

**[TITLE PAGE]**

***COASTWATCHERS***

**D. O. W. HALL**

**WAR HISTORY BRANCH**

**DEPARTMENT OF INTERNAL AFFAIRS WELLINGTON, NEW ZEALAND**

**1951**



# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

[EDITORPAGE]

***THIS ACCOUNT of the services of New Zealand Coastwatchers may be found to be more interesting than were the monotonous vigils so steadfastly endured. The ill-fated group in the Gilberts gave a magnificent example of cold courage and devotion to duty which should not be forgotten.***

***This is the 19th of the Episodes and Studies series, which will be completed in 24 numbers. Binding cases may be obtained from booksellers.***

***New Zealand's share in the Pacific War is related in a volume which we expect to publish within the next twelve months.***

**H. K. KIPPENBERGER**

***Major-General***

**EDITOR-IN-CHIEF**

**NEW ZEALAND WAR HISTORIES**

# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

**THIS NARRATIVE** is based on *New Zealand Post and Telegraph Department and Army and Navy records, a report on the Cape Expedition by L. Clifton of the Aerodromes Services Branch of the (then) Public Works Department, and The Coast Watchers by Eric Feldt (1946).*

The maps were drawn by L. D. McCormick. The photographs come from various collections which are stated where they are known:

*Department of Internal Affairs, John Pascoe Cover ( top left), page 9, page 10, and page 11 ( bottom)*

*D. L. Vaughan Cover ( top right), page 18, and page 19*

*E. J. Marklew Cover ( bottom), page 11 ( top), page 12, and page 13 National Publicity Studios page 14 ( top)*

*Public Works Department, J. H. Sorensen page 14 ( bottom)*

*Public Works Department, J. E. Williamson page 15 ( top)*

*Royal New Zealand Air Force page 15 ( bottom)*

*Public Works Department, B. H. Challis pages 16 and 17*

*British Phosphate Commission page 20 ( top)*

*Public Works Department, E. W. Lee page 20 ( bottom)*

*Public Relations Office, Fiji page 21 ( top)*

*Royal Australian Navy, Naval Intelligence Division page 21 ( bottom)*

*Public Works Department page 22 ( top)*

*Public Works Department, D. A. Paine page 22 ( centre)*

*Public Works Department, E. Mitchell page 22 ( bottom) and page 23 ( bottom)*

*Public Works Department, C. Fleming page 23 ( top)*

*Public Works Department, J. D. Knowles page 24 ( top right)*

# EPIISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## COASTWATCHING

## *Coastwatching*

**THE DUTIES OF THE COASTWATCHER** are not spectacular. His role is passive or preventive rather than active and aggressive, but the information he obtains can be of vital importance. The commerce-raiding enemy at large in the **Pacific** is restricted in his activities because of a well-founded suspicion that a good coastwatching system has spread a wide net to catch him. He does not dare come within close distance of land, and even normally uninhabited islands may hide a trap specially set for his interception in the eyes and radio of a coastwatcher.

The coastwatcher's duty is tedious. He has to spend long hours looking out over the inconstant but unchanging ocean or struggling with his radio, groping for contact with the outside world. He has to endure, perhaps to an exaggerated degree, all the monotony and boredom of service life without the compensation of a multitude of new friendships. It is only near a few main ports that he will have enough to do to keep healthily busy.

Coastwatching was carried on from our own coasts and those of New Zealand dependencies. Watch was also kept on those islands to the north and the south which might, in enemy hands, menace our security. Although the greater part of the coastwatching communications system was operated by New Zealanders, the actual watch for ships and aircraft on many **Pacific** islands was kept by local civilians and natives.

In 1929 the **Navy** had drawn up a scheme for maintaining a watch from the coasts of New Zealand, using the services of the Royal New Zealand Naval Volunteer Reserve. In 1935 the scheme was modified to pass over the duty of actual coastwatching to trustworthy civilians who were to report to the District Naval Intelligence Officers in the four main cities, the whole organisation being under the operational control of the New Zealand Naval Board.

The scheme for the location and maintenance of coastwatching posts throughout New Zealand was further elaborated during 1938 and

1939, provision being made for fifty-eight stations operating a 24-hour watch. On the outbreak of war the scheme was smoothly brought into action. In March 1940 there were sixty-two stations, manned by service and civilian personnel, at different points round the coast, many of them in out-of-the-way positions.

In later years of the war the coastwatching organisation was several times modified. The number of stations fluctuated; some were abolished altogether and aerial patrols substituted. Stations were established in the **Chatham Islands** and also on **Norfolk Island** and the Kermadecs. By 1943 a number of radar stations had been established in New Zealand and on outlying islands: these carried out duties analogous to coastwatching but by a different means. By 1944 twenty-one coastwatching stations were retained on a care and maintenance basis only; that is, they were left fully equipped and could be quickly manned and immediately used in an emergency.

The more important and accessible stations were linked to the Area Combined Headquarters by direct line telephone. Others, in the more remote positions, reported by radio.

Although operational control was centred in the **Navy**, the coastwatchers might be civilians or might belong to the **Navy** (at port war signal stations), the **Air Force** (at some radar stations), or the **Army** (at many coastwatching and some radar stations). The approaches to some ports were equipped with additional reporting devices which were directly controlled by the **Navy**. In spite of this diversity the system functioned efficiently, and the naval authorities were able to get rapid information of all shipping movements.

# EPIISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## PACIFIC COASTWATCHING

## *Pacific Coastwatching*

**THE NEW ZEALAND Naval Board** controlled the coastwatching stations established in the eastern **Pacific**. The screen of stations directly protected our ports and coasts and interlocked with the coastwatching system to the west for which **Australia** was responsible.

The political control of the eastern **Pacific** was, for practical purposes, vested in **Britain** and New Zealand. The coastwatching system set up in early 1941 included the mandated territory of **Western Samoa**, the **Cook Islands**, the Crown Colony of **Fiji**, the monarchy of **Tonga**, many islands in the widely scattered domain of the High Commissioner for the Western Pacific (which extends from the Solomon Islands to Pitcairn), and also some islands not continuously inhabited. In 1941, when the system was first in full operation, there were stations on ten islands of the Gilberts, seven in the **Ellice Group**, four in the Phoenix and three in the Tokelau Groups (reporting through **Apia**), five in the **Samoa** area, three in the **Fanning Island** neighbourhood, eleven in the Cook Group, six in Tongan territory, and nine in the Fiji Islands. These numbers fluctuated during the war, the general tendency being for more stations to be established during 1942 and 1943 (ignoring the loss of the Gilberts) and for stations to be closed down altogether or relieved of full duty during 1944 and 1945. A coastwatching station in this account means a station with a radio or other means of communicating with headquarters. It might have one, two, or a larger number of actual lookout posts feeding it with information.

New Zealand's coastwatching stations were mere pinpoints in the immensity of the **Pacific** Ocean. The most northerly were those on **Fanning Island**, 230 miles north of the Equator, and Makin, or Butaritari, Island in the Gilberts, 1660 miles west of Fanning and thirty miles nearer the Equator. The southernmost was the station on Campbell Island, some 3300 miles due south of Makin. A like distance, over sixty-four degrees of longitude and twenty-five degrees of latitude, separated Pitcairn Island, 2890 miles east-north-east of New Zealand,

from the Auckland Islands. All the island stations in this vast area of ten million square miles were stored and serviced by the Aerodrome Services Branch of the Public Works Department by means of three small auxiliary-screw sailing vessels, the *Tagua*, *New Golden Hind*, and *Ranui*.

The operational control of this wide network of coastwatching stations was centred in New Zealand, but our responsibility for maintaining them was limited. The Post and Telegraph Department supplied radio equipment for many stations, both in our own dependencies and on islands governed by **Britain**. The fullest use was made of existing facilities, and wherever a Government or a private individual had already installed any type of radio transmitter a coastwatching station was established, even if arrangements for keeping the watch were not always entirely satisfactory.

In all island territories a general instruction was issued to the population at large to report to the authorities the appearance of strange ships or aircraft, as well as drifting or stranded mines or unusual flotsam and jetsam. On populous islands like **Viti Levu**, in the Fiji Group, general reporting by responsible European and Fijian individuals was well developed. It was, however, laid down that a coastwatching lookout should not be more than two hours away from its radio station, so that the delay in reporting a sighting was never likely to exceed three hours. Undoubtedly, local conditions directly affected the value of the reports made.



# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## THE MANNING OF THE STATIONS

## *The Manning of the Stations*

**LOCAL** authorities gave the utmost assistance to the coastwatching system. At Rarotonga, in the **Cook Islands**, for instance, where there was already a Government radio station, the watch was first kept by members of the island boys' brigade. The boys tired of the novelty of looking out over the empty sea, and the duty was taken over by returned Polynesian soldiers at the local rates of pay for constables. The lookout points were all high up, and it was hard work scrambling up to them. On Niue the watch was organised by the Resident Commissioner, the coastwatchers being natives who were paid two shillings a day for their services. The instructions to these coastwatchers held out an unusual inducement to unflagging zeal: 'One sentry must always be on the lookout, and if he carries out his soldier's duty properly he may see a battle at sea.' On Tarawa, in the Gilberts, the Government radio operator made the coastwatching reports from information supplied by native lookouts: he was to lose his life as a consequence of this service.

Not all **Pacific** stations could be manned by local persons. In the **Pacific Islands** generally there was a shortage of trained wireless operators. Attempts were made in 1941 to overcome this deficiency and native operators were trained in **Suva**, in **Tonga**, at **Tarawa**, and later at **Funafuti**. These men later gave good service, though in some cases their scanty knowledge of English was a grave handicap. The quaint phraseology used in their often imperfectly coded signals could be alternatively a source of exasperation or amusement. In the first months at least (and often for longer) these native operators had to be helped by skilled European operators supplied by the New Zealand Post and Telegraph Department, and in some places native operators had to be replaced by New Zealanders. The men sent were all volunteers.

The New Zealand Chiefs of Staff doubted the wisdom of posting to remote tropical islands young men without much experience of life who might not easily adjust themselves to the isolated conditions in places where they would be the only Europeans among a native population. It

was decided, therefore, that these operators should have older men as companions. Thus soldier companions to most of the wireless operators were sent in pairs to the Gilbert and Ellice Islands, except **Funafuti**, where two operators were stationed—until **Japan** entered the war they also had the company of the District Officer. When reliefs were sent to the **Ellice Group** early in 1943 the number of soldier companions was reduced to one for each operator. In Fiji, on some islands of the Tongan Group, and on certain other islands, soldiers were sent to some of the more important stations to supervise the work of native operators. On Fanning Island coastwatching was the responsibility of the military garrison.

The sub-Antarctic islands were manned at first wholly by men recruited by the Public Works Department, and both Raoul (or Sunday) Island in the Kermadecs and Suvarov (or Suvarrow) Island had, to begin with, Public Works survey parties which also acted as coastwatchers. The radio operators in each case were recruited from the Post and Telegraph Department. Suvarov had been noted by the Chiefs of Staff in 1940 as an uninhabited island with a good anchorage which raiders could use. Early in 1942 it was swamped in a hurricane, the coastwatchers climbing a tree to avoid being drowned. After the sea subsided the operator had to dry out his equipment and almost three months passed before the station was on the air again.

During 1942 **United States** naval or military forces occupied many islands in the south- eastern **Pacific**. Some coastwatching stations were handed over entirely to the Americans: for instance, they manned two of the Tongan stations. On Canton and Christmas Islands the New Zealand signals staffs remained but passed under American control. In Fiji and elsewhere American radar stations were installed, extending the scope of the reporting service.

At the beginning of 1941 there were seven authorities controlling communications in the eastern **Pacific** area for whose defence New Zealand was responsible. Some of the fifty existing radio stations were operated by natives, others by private persons—missionaries or planters.

**There was no co-ordination, and the heterogeneous nature of the control of the radio stations made the system, if it could be called that, too inefficient for the prompt passing of signals from the coastwatching stations then being established. Naval intelligence is a unity. The enemy reports from one area are of interest and importance to all other areas, and the nearer the origin of the report the more interesting and important. But reports are valueless unless they are swiftly passed to the authority which will act upon them.**

**In agreement with the Governor of [Fiji](#), who is also the High Commissioner for the Western [Pacific](#), the [New Zealand Government](#) set up a unified communications system centred in [Suva](#) under the direction of a civilian official supplied by the Post and Telegraph Department. He bore the title of Controller of Pacific Communications. He had direct control of the important [Suva](#) aeradio station and also acted as adviser to the Government of [Fiji](#) in communications matters, but in an emergency he could assume executive powers and would then be responsible to the Government of New Zealand. After Japan entered the war, the Controller of [Pacific](#) Communications early in December 1941 assumed and exercised this authority. [Suva](#) had a number of advantages as a control centre. It was geographically near the centre of the area, it already had a powerful radio station, and it was linked by cable to [Australia](#) and New Zealand and, by [Fanning Island](#), to [Canada](#).**

**In each island group a parent station passed to [Suva](#) any messages received by it from individual coastwatching stations. These parent stations were Ocean Island in the Gilberts, \* [Funafuti](#) in the [Ellice Group](#), Canton Island in the Phoenix Group, [Apia](#) in [Samoa](#), [Fanning Island](#), [Rarotonga](#) in the Cook Group, Nukualofa in [Tonga](#), and [Suva](#) itself in the Fiji Group. Raoul Island and the [Chatham Islands](#) had [Wellington](#) as their parent station, [Norfolk Island](#) had [Wellington](#) or [Auckland](#), and the sub-Antarctic islands had [Awarua](#).**

**To make sure that each station was always 'on the air' if needed, sub-stations passed signals to parent stations and the parent stations**

themselves made contact with **Suva** at regular schedule times. Unless there were any signals to be sent, these schedules did not go beyond the acknowledgement of each other's call signs and signal strengths. At each parent station a constant loud-speaker watch on a frequency used by the sub-stations made it possible for a signal to be received at any time; a sighting report from an individual coastwatching station would be immediately retransmitted to **Suva** by the more powerful parent station. Signals describing the sighting of aeroplanes or ships received at **Suva** from anywhere in the coastwatching system were reported, during 1941, to the Resident Naval Officer, and afterwards to the New Zealand Naval Liaison Officer, and if unidentified or important were retransmitted by **Suva** to **Auckland**. From early in 1942 the United States Fleet had many ships in the South Pacific, and from that time it was arranged that **Honolulu** should also receive everything that **Auckland** received; both stations also retransmitted automatically any signal received which had not originated with the other. In this way important signals were known with a minimum loss of time to both the New Zealand and the **United States** naval authorities.

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\* When Ocean Island was evacuated in February 1942 the auxiliary parent station, Beru, took over.

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# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## SIGHTING REPORTS

## *Sighting Reports*

**COASTWATCHING** duties are so self-evident that they do not call for complicated instructions. The two important considerations are, first, to maintain an alert watch through the twenty-four hours, and second, to keep communications in an efficient state so that any sightings of ships or aircraft can be promptly reported.

Even though the duty is simple in outline, there is a great deal of difference between a bad sighting report and a good one. An exact description of a ship or an aircraft makes its identification certain instead of doubtful. A list of questions to answer about shipping and aircraft simplified procedure, and a good sighting report might read something like this:

**N.Z.N.L.O., Fiji, from Niutobutabu. Ship sighted 212047 Z bearing north-west distance 7 miles course 90 speed 15 raked bow cruiser stern one raked funnel amidships one mast forward one samson post forward of bridge two aft one gun forward and aft colour grey 7000 tons. 212103 Z.**

From the plot of the movements of merchant ships kept by naval operations officers the vessel could then be identified easily and its progress noted. Special alarm signals supplemented these general sighting reports. An attack by enemy aircraft was signalled by 'AAAA', an enemy landing or shelling by 'LLLL'. All enemy or suspected enemy reports were given the priority 'Immediate'.

In the **Fiji** and **Ellice** Groups, where there was some prospect of enemy attack and also, at least from 1943 onwards, some means of meeting it, a special series of one-word signals was used to report sightings. 'Tallyho' denoted an aircraft sighting, 'Rats' an enemy aircraft, 'Hounds' a friendly aircraft. 'Bishop' meant a suspicious vessel, suspected enemy. These first flashes were followed by amplifying reports giving the routine description of the ship or plane.

# EPIISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## GILBERT AND ELLICE ISLANDS



## *Gilbert and Ellice Islands*

**THE PLAN** for extending the coastwatching network to the Gilbert and Ellice Islands was formulated in May 1941 and put into operation in July. The parent stations were to be Beru and **Funafuti**. Initially fifteen operators \* were supplied from New Zealand as well as twenty-two soldier companions. Native operators to assist them were also being trained in **Fiji**.

On 20 July HMFS *Viti* \*\* left **Suva** on a voyage of over 5000 miles to install these posts on

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\* All the operators in the Gilbert and Ellice Islands had received training in weather reporting and were equipped with a supply of weather-report forms and code-books. At Funafuti pilot balloon flights were also made in addition to the ordinary weather reports.

\*\* 700 tons, then owned by the Colony of **Fiji**; commissioned during the war as a naval vessel.

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ten islands in the Gilberts and on seven in the Ellices. It was difficult to land at many of the islands selected for the installation of coastwatching stations, and the officer in charge of establishing them had an unenviable experience which he described in a telegram: 'During Nanumea installation very nearly lost my life ... whilst returning to ship canoe overturned on reef, outrigger striking my head. Out cold, saved by native.... Very difficult get ashore and back ship.'

Ashore there were Government buildings available for use on Beru and **Funafuti**, but on the other islands native houses were built for the coastwatchers, a type of dwelling appropriate to the climate and preferred for their own residences by most Government officials. Some of the islands appeared idyllic, at least to the outsider. On one island in the Ellices the house in which the coastwatchers lived was sited in a

beautiful position overlooking the lagoon. Cool breezes blew constantly and mosquitoes were unknown. The natives supplied fresh food, usually as a gift. The available recreations were sailing, fishing, and bathing.

One of the soldiers captured in the northern Gilberts also testified afterwards to the pleasant climate of his island. But on one occasion the island, only six feet high, was swamped in a hurricane by heavy seas. All the houses were damaged but were quickly repaired. Here, too, fresh food could be obtained locally, though the coastwatchers depended on rain water for drinking.

The men's relations with the natives were generally good, except on one of the Ellices where the two soldiers quarrelled with the inhabitants and also did not speak to each other for months. When the *Degei* \* called at some of the islands in February 1942, her captain remarked that morale was high at most stations: 'Their isolation appears to make them self-sufficient and they did not offer much demonstration at our arrival.'

The worst feature of this island life, no matter how attractive the climate and the setting, was that the men often did not have enough to do, and the opportunities for recreation were not varied enough to keep them happy throughout a long period of duty. The radio operators, with their weather reporting duties, equipment maintenance, and radio schedules to keep, were more fortunate than the soldier companions, but for most coastwatchers boredom was the arch-enemy. In some instances, however, the ease of tropical living did directly affect efficiency and radio schedules were laxly kept. A serious case of neglect of duty occurred in 1943 at a northern island in the **Ellice Group**; it was particularly grave as the Japanese advance into the Gilberts had put the Ellices in the front line. This station one day went off the air, whereupon grave fears arose at **Funafuti** as to whether the island had been taken by the Japanese. Arrangements were hurriedly made to send a Catalina flying boat with a spare set in case the transmitter had broken down. It was intended to land on the comparatively small lagoon, which in itself was a hazardous task, but the risk was considered necessary in view of the importance attached to the island at that time.

However, a few hours before the plane was ready to depart from **Funafuti**, contact was established with the island. The NCO operator excused himself by saying that he had had a high fever and asked to return to New Zealand for health reasons. This was described as ‘an unfortunate occurrence’, as the Americans, who were preparing for the invasion of the Gilberts, were at that time ‘intensely interested in that island’ and had ‘expressed the wish that the coastwatching service should continue normally as any change in procedure or traffic would arouse the suspicion of the enemy’. The operator was relieved of his duties a few days later and returned to **Suva**.

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\* A small motor vessel owned by the Colony of **Fiji**.

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COASTWATCHING STATION AT CAPE TERAWHITI, COOK STRAIT

**COASTWATCHING STATION AT CAPE TERAWHITI, COOK STRAIT**

**New Zealand Coastwatchers**



Off duty at Cape Terawhiti

### Off duty at Cape Terawhiti



On duty at Cape Terawhiti;  
night work on the log

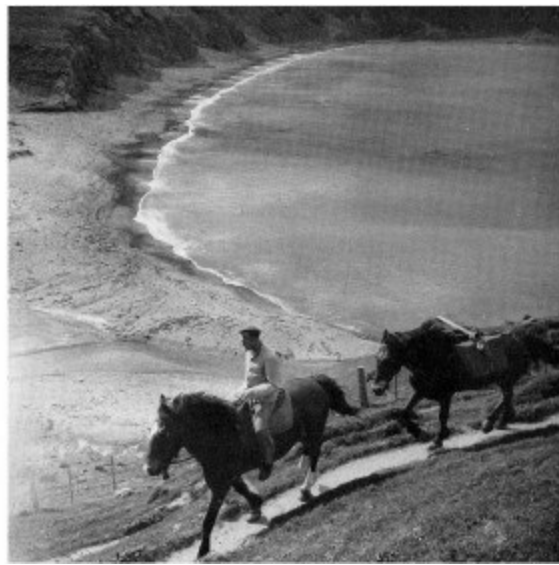
### On duty at Cape Terawhiti; night work on the log



Radar crew outside their quarters  
at Moko Hinau, Auckland

### Radar crew outside their quarters at Moko Hinau, **Auckland**

Packing supplies past Oteranga Bay to Cape Terawhiti



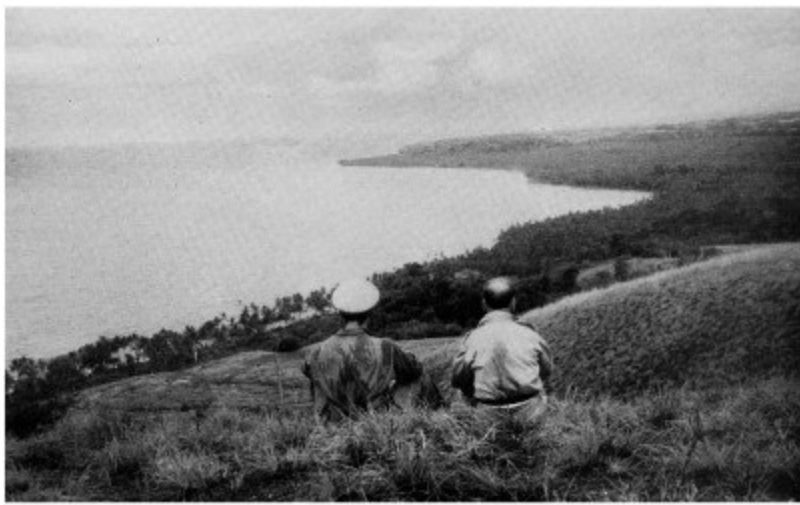
**Packing supplies past Oteranga Bay to Cape Terawhiti**



DAVID H. SMITH  
RADAR HUT  
1943  
New Georgia

**CAMOUFLAGED RADAR HUTS**

*Visu Visu, New Georgia*



LOOKING EAST FROM ESPERANCE RADAR STATION  
TOWARDS KOKUMBONA AND LUNGA, *Guadalcanal*

**LOOKING EAST FROM ESPERANCE RADAR STATION TOWARDS KOKUMBONA AND LUNGA,  
*Guadalcanal***

RNZN RADAR OPERATORS' QUARTERS, built by natives for the camp, Savo, *Solomons*



**RNZN RADAR OPERATORS' QUARTERS, built by natives for the camp, Savo, *Solomons***





GOVERNMENT  
RADIO STATION,  
*Rarotonga*

**GOVERNMENT RADIO STATION, *Rarotonga***

*THE TAGUA AT ANCHOR, Raoul Island*



**THE TAGUA AT ANCHOR, *Raoul Island***



COASTWATCHERS' CAMP AFTER THE FIRST HURRICANE, 1941  
*Suvarrow*

**COASTWATCHERS' CAMP AFTER THE FIRST HURRICANE, 1941**  
*Suvarrow*



AFTER A SEVERE  
HURRICANE, 1942  
*Suvarrow*  
This aerial photograph  
shows the extensive  
damage to the island.  
The hurricane reduced  
the size of the island  
and destroyed much  
of its vegetation.

**AFTER A SEVERE HURRICANE, 1942**  
*Suvarrow*

**This aerial photograph shows the extensive damage to the island. The hurricane reduced the size of the island and destroyed much of its vegetation**





DISAPPOINTMENT IN THE SOUTH PACIFIC. REASON: UNCLEAR]D FROM THE WESTERN CLIFFS OF THE AUCKLAND ISLANDS

**COASTWATCHING IN THE SOUTH PACIFIC DISAPPOINTMENT [ gap — reason: unclear]D FROM THE WESTERN CLIFFS OF THE AUCKLAND ISLANDS**



HMFS *VITI* which in 1941 took men and equipment to coastwatching posts in the Pacific.

**HMFS *VITI* which in 1941 took men and equipment to coastwatching posts in the Pacific**



METEOROLOGICAL WORK at Funafuti, in the Ellice Islands. Lieutenant D. L. Vaughan takes bearings on a pilot balloon.

**METEOROLOGICAL WORK at Funafuti, in the Ellice Islands. Lieutenant D. L. Vaughan takes bearings on a pilot balloon**



THE WATERFRONT AT FUNAFUTI  
**THE WATERFRONT AT FUNAFUTI**



**COASTWATCHING HEADQUARTERS AT NUKUFETAU, September 1941**



**BOMBARDMENT OF  
NAURU ISLAND**  
In December 1940 the German  
raider *Komet* shelled the Nauru  
fuel-oil tanks.

**BOMBARDMENT OF NAURU ISLAND**

**In December 1940 the German raider *Komet* shelled the Nauru fuel-oil tanks**



**THE PAN EXPEDITION APPROACHES PITCAIRN ISLAND**

MORIAL AT TARAWA  
se names include those of  
tteen New Zealanders.



[ gap — reason: unclear]MORIAL AT TARAWA

[ gap — reason: unclear]se names include those of [ gap — reason: unclear]en New Zealanders

Major D. G. Kennedy (left), a New Zealander, whose work in the Solomons was outstanding. The photograph was taken at Segi.



**Major D. G. Kennedy (left), a New Zealander, whose work in the Solomons was outstanding. The photograph was taken at Segi**

## **The Cape Expedition**



No. 1 Camp at Port Ross, Auckland Islands. Note the height of the sub-Antarctic scrub.

**No. 1 Camp at Port Ross, Auckland Islands. Note the height of the sub-Antarctic scrub**





A close view of a pre-fabricated hut at No. 2 Camp at Carnley Harbour, Auckland Islands.

**A close view of a pre-fabricated hut at No. 2 Camp at Carnley Harbour, Auckland Islands**



No. 3 Camp at Perseverance Harbour, Campbell Islands, in the course of construction.

**No. 3 Camp at Perseverance Harbour, Campbell Islands, in the course of construction**



**AUCKLAND ISLANDS**

Constant watch. The wind has blown back the waterfall.



**Constant watch. The wind has blown back the waterfall**

A surveyor takes observations. His theodolite is sheltered from the wind by a screen.



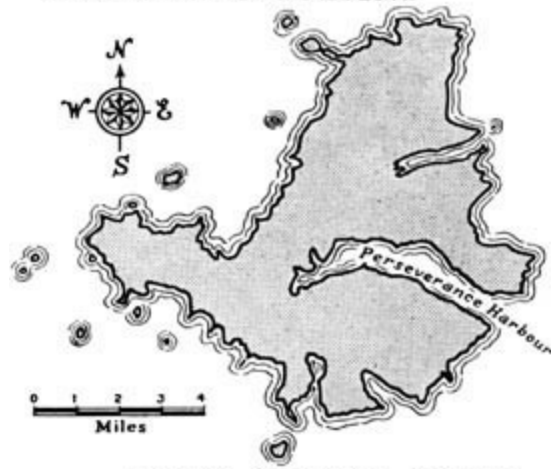
**A surveyor takes observations. His theodolite is sheltered from the wind by a screen**

No. 3 Emergency radio station, in the only dry cave on Campbell Island.

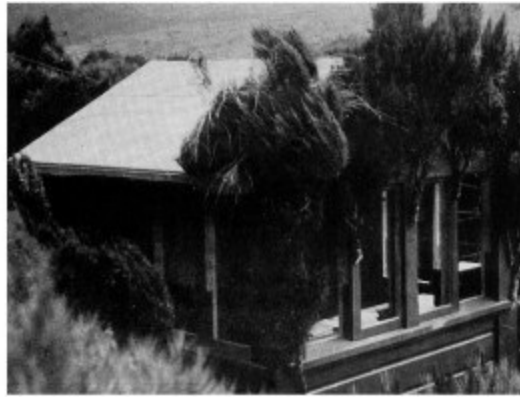


**No. 3 Emergency radio station, in the only dry cave on Campbell Island**

# CAMPBELL ISLAND



## South Pacific Ocean CAMPBELL ISLAND



ABOVE : A lookout hut which replaced improvised shelters.  
LEFT : A member of the first party at his post.

**ABOVE : A lookout hut which replaced improvised shelters.**  
**LEFT : A member of the first party at his post**



Radio was the strongest link with the outside world.

**Radio was the strongest link with the outside world**



After Beru failed, when the Japanese occupied the southern Gilberts, precautions were taken at **Funafuti** to guard against the possibility of enemy attack. New watching points were established on the atoll and fuel for the radio station was stored in several places. An emergency station was established on another island of the **Funafuti** atoll and stocked with food. Late in 1942 **United States Forces** occupied **Funafuti** and within three months had established an airfield there; subsequently they also occupied and built airstrips on Nukufetau and Nanumea. In the prolonged air raids on **Funafuti** in April and September 1943 the radio station was damaged extensively and later had to be evacuated for a more substantial building—the island jail. The officer in charge of the station, Lieutenant D. L. Vaughan, extended his keying line to a slit trench, and on several occasions signalled from this shelter that raids were in progress. He was mentioned in despatches for ‘devotion to duty, initiative, and valuable service in maintaining vital communications in the Gilbert and Ellice Islands.’

The Gilbert Islands were so close to the Japanese mandated territory in the Marshalls that they were placed in a position of immediate danger by **Japan's** entry into the war. In December 1941 the Japanese occupied the northern islands of the Group (Makin, Little Makin, and Abaiang), apparently to secure the Marshalls bases against Allied observation or attack. The Japanese also visited **Tarawa**, placed the European inhabitants on parole, and left again.

On Bikati Island in the Makin (or Butaritari) atoll, the coastwatchers calmly reported the entry into the lagoon of twenty-three enemy ships. The Japanese landed next day and the following day captured the three coastwatchers, but not before a last distress signal had been sent and the radio and code-books destroyed. Seven New Zealanders were made prisoner by this time —three wireless operators and four soldier companions. \* They refused to answer Japanese questions about the defences of **Fiji**, in spite of the flourishing of a revolver in their faces and several blows with a stick, and denied all knowledge of other coastwatching stations in the Group. They were taken to the Marshall

Islands and soon afterwards to **Japan**, where they excited some curiosity as the first prisoners of war to appear there. All these men were later mentioned in despatches.

The remaining islands of the Gilbert Group were not occupied by the enemy until about nine months later. During this time the coastwatchers carried on as usual. They had volunteered to remain at their posts, and the information they could give of the strength of an enemy attack and even the negative information that would be provided when they became silent were equally vital to the Allies.

Towards the end of February 1942 the *Degei* was sent to the Ellices and southern Gilberts with stores for the coastwatchers. She was ordered to go no farther north than Nonouiti, where the supplies for Kuria, Abemama, and Maiana were put ashore. The *Degei* was making the voyage under difficulties as Japanese air patrols passed daily over the Gilberts. She moved only at night and did not break radio silence. It was arranged that a half-caste should use a launch towing a lifeboat to take the stores to the three northern stations. The coastwatchers at these posts, receiving their stores by this means, must have felt that they were already lost, even though not already forgotten.

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\* Corporals M. P. McQuinn, J. M. Jones, and S. R. Wallace, Privates J. M. Menzies, M. Menzies, L. E. H. Muller and B. Were. The first three were the wireless operators; they were given military rank retrospectively. All were repatriated at the end of the war.

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**EPIISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2**

**THE SOUTHERN GILBERTS OCCUPIED**

## *The Southern Gilberts Occupied*

**THE OCEAN ISLAND** radio station was manned by some civilian New Zealand Post and Telegraph operators seconded for duty with the **Western Pacific High Commission**. The Japanese shelled the island on 8 December 1941. One of the New Zealanders, Corporal P. B. Thorburn (he was afterwards attested into the Army), was mentioned in despatches for leaving hospital during this first raid, in spite of a septic leg, and returning to duty. Thorburn was evacuated from Ocean Island with most of the other Europeans in February 1942, when his colleague, Sergeant R. Third, volunteered to remain and keep the radio station open to transmit coastwatching reports.

The final occupation of the Gilberts by the Japanese was heralded by the fall of Nauru Island on 25 August 1942 and of Ocean Island, after shelling, on 26 August. Third, who had destroyed his radio and code-books, was captured and remained a prisoner on the island, dying in captivity probably late in 1942. Abemama and **Tarawa** were occupied early in September 1942, and towards the end of the month Tamama, Maiana, Beru, Nonouiti, and Kuria were visited by Japanese parties.

The conduct of the coastwatchers during the invasion was altogether admirable. They coded and sent off signals giving the strength of the enemy, and on some islands signals were still being sent after the enemy had landed. All stations sent the correct distress signal 'LLLL' before their radio and code-books were destroyed. Some sent a last message heroic in its simplicity and understatement—'Japs coming. Regards to all.' or 'Two warships visiting us. No launch yet.' or, sticking even more closely to the business in hand, 'Ship one mile NW of island with high superstructure forward.'

'The Naval Board', it is stated in a service file under a date in January 1943, 'has been particularly impressed by the calm, unflurried manner in which messages have been coded when the enemy had already landed on the island. The correct procedure for informing us when they were about to destroy their sets has been carried out up to the

last minute. In every case, it is clear that they have kept going to the end, their one aim, regardless of their own safety, being to keep us informed. It may be relevant to stress here that a wireless set is an unpleasant thing with which to be caught in war.'

The coastwatchers were not all captured immediately. They had been waiting nine months in daily expectation of the Japanese invasion, and no doubt had often considered what action they would take when the enemy arrived. Many of them escaped and hid in the bush for several days, but gave themselves up either when the Japanese threatened reprisals against the native inhabitants or when they felt that reprisals would be the result of their escape. One party had an excellent chance at least of putting to sea but were refused the use of a launch by the natives for fear of Japanese action and gave themselves up to the enemy.

There are some other indications of how well the coastwatchers bore themselves in the testimony collected afterwards from natives and other observers. (Some French Roman Catholic missionaries were left at liberty by the Japanese under close and onerous supervision.) One soldier when taken prisoner refused to allow a Japanese to lead him by the arm. When the guard presented his bayonet, the soldier imperturbably asked him for a drink. On another island, while he was collecting his belongings, a New Zealand soldier was jostled by a Japanese whom he immediately knocked down. There is no record of any Japanese reprisal for this incident.

Seventeen New Zealand coastwatchers—seven wireless operators and ten soldiers—were taken prisoner in this completion of the Japanese occupation of the Gilberts. Five civilians, including the Government wireless operator at **Tarawa**, were imprisoned with them. The prisoners were brought to **Tarawa** immediately after their capture and remained for three days tied to coconut trees in front of the Japanese commandant's house. They were then confined in the native lunatic asylum enclosure and throughout the next few weeks were

intermittently put to work shifting gravel or unloading shipping at the wharf.

In the early afternoon on 15 October 1942, **United States** forces bombed and shelled **Tarawa**. During the raid one prisoner, believed to have been a civilian, escaped from the asylum enclosure and ran excitedly along the beach, waving to the American planes. Armed Korean labourers searched the village for him and, catching him in the open, shot him immediately. In the late afternoon, when most of the native population was gathered at the wharf out of sight, the Japanese killed all the prisoners. It is not known whether the dominant motive for this murder was reprisal for the raid or revenge for the escape. The Japanese who beheaded the prisoners with his sword was an official, possibly a civilian, in charge of the Korean labourers.

At an enquiry into the **Tarawa** murders held by an official of the Western Pacific High Commission in October 1944, one native eye-witness gave the following evidence. At about five o'clock in the evening of the day of the American raid he heard a good deal of noise from the asylum enclosure and saw the European prisoners inside sitting in a line surrounded by a number of Japanese. A dead European was dragged out from inside the asylum building and placed in front of the other prisoners. (It is conjectured that this was the man shot for escaping earlier in the afternoon.) 'Then one Japanese started to kill the Europeans.... I did not see any more because I fainted.'

The coastwatchers who died on **Tarawa** (and Sergeant Third on Ocean Island) were posthumously mentioned in despatches 'For exemplary conduct in coastwatching and communications duties in the **Gilbert Islands** area in the face of the enemy, despite overwhelming odds and the knowledge that relief or escape was impossible.' \*

The civilian status of some of the coastwatchers, men seconded from the Post and Telegraph Department as radio operators or Public Works Department employees, had caused anxiety in New Zealand after the capture by the enemy of the first civilian wireless operators in the

**northern Gilberts. It was decided in January 1944 that these men should be given military rank retrospectively to the date of capture, so that their dependants should be eligible for pension rights and other privileges. The other civilian coastwatchers were enrolled in the Army from 1 December 1942, when those who had been captured in the southern Gilberts were already dead. Although the Japanese in their treatment of the prisoners on **Tarawa** did not take any**

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**\* The New Zealanders who died on **Tarawa** were Lieutenant A. L. Taylor, Corporals H. R. C. Hearn, A. C. Heenan, J. J. McCarthy, A. E. McKenna, T. C. Murray, C. A. Pearsall, Privates R. A. Ellis, R. I. Hitchon, D. H. Howe, R. Jones, C. A. Kilpin, R. M. McKenzie, J. H. Nichol, C. J. Owen, W. A. R. Parker, and L. B. Speedy. (The first seven of these were wireless operators given subsequent military rank.) The civilians who were killed at the same time were R. G. Morgan (the **Tarawa** wireless operator), B. Cleary, I. R. Handley, A. M. McArthur, and Rev. A. L. Sadd.**

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**stand upon the principles of international law, it would have been possible for them to have justified the execution of the seven wireless operators (though not of the soldiers) on the ground that they had been civilians doing work of an essentially military character. \***

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**\* The position of the remaining coastwatchers in the Gilberts had obviously become desperate. They can only have been abandoned because it was considered that the information they supplied was worth the sacrifice. It must have been expected that they would be captured, and attention might have been given earlier to their status as civilians or combatants.— *Note by Editor-in-Chief.***

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# EPIISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## THE PAN EXPEDITION



## *The Pan Expedition*

**THE EASTERN PACIFIC** is the widest expanse of nearly unbroken ocean in the world. In this empty area Pitcairn is one of the few islands close to the route between **Panama** and New Zealand. Early in the war, Nelson Dyett, a man with a good knowledge of radio who had personal links with Pitcairn, volunteered to establish and operate a radio station there with his own equipment. \*\* The New Zealand Naval Board accepted this offer and the station was opened on 20 December 1939. Besides serving as a link in the **Pacific** communications system, the station was available to retransmit distress signals, report the sighting of enemy vessels, and pass signals made by any ships calling at the island that could not themselves break radio silence.

**America's** entry into the war and the mounting of offensives against the Japanese from the South and South-West Pacific commands caused a great increase in the shipping passing between the **United States** or the Panama Canal and **Australia** and New Zealand. In 1943 the United States Navy asked the New Zealand Naval Board to establish a BAMS \*\*\* station on Pitcairn. A larger establishment was required as the new station would be the medium for transmitting to ships at sea in that area important signals affecting their route or safety. Most merchant ships did not carry high frequency radio equipment and the medium frequency BAMS service was necessary to communicate with them.

A merchant ship, the *J. Sterling Morton*, 7181 tons, was supplied by the **United States** to transport the Pan expedition (as the party establishing the new station was called). She sailed from Auckland on 15 December 1943 with the establishment party, drawn from the Public Works and Post and Telegraph Departments, and a representative of the administrative authority, the **Western Pacific High Commission**.

The coast of Pitcairn Island is precipitous. Surf boats can be beached at only one point and the unbroken ocean swell makes boat work dangerous. To simplify unloading, everything had been shipped in packages of up to 200 lb. weight. In spite of this, lowering the gear into

open boats and hoisting the packages up the cliffs of the island were difficult operations, even with the help of the whole able-bodied population and the construction party. The ship remained off the island for eleven days. Four operators, enlisted in the New Zealand Army, had been landed, and Dyett, who was first attested into the Army, was also appointed, together with the Pitcairn-born Young and a cook. The station was kept in operation until October 1945. When the New Zealanders were withdrawn in November 1945, the Western Pacific High Commission retained the station for its own use.

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**\*\* He was later taken into the service of the [Western Pacific High Commission](#).**

**\*\*\* [British and Allied Merchant Shipping](#).**

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**EPIISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2**

**COASTWATCHERS IN THE SOLOMONS**

## *Coastwatchers in the Solomons*

**A SYSTEM of coastwatching posts operated by the Royal Australian Navy covered the Solomons and New Guinea area. The coastwatchers were mostly men whose ordinary work was in the Island territories, ‘islanders’ as they were nicknamed, administrative officers, traders, or plantation owners. These coastwatchers voluntarily stayed behind when the Japanese invaded their islands; they continued to send reports, their knowledge of the natives and the country enabling them to live safely in concealment and to win the game of hide-and-seek with the enemy. Not all evaded capture or death. Their reports were of the highest value to the Allied cause. After the Americans had landed on Guadalcanal, day after day the signals from the northern islands warned the defences to expect attack from the air or the sea and enabled an exact calculation to be made of the arrival of the enemy. Admiral Halsey himself acknowledged the great debt owed to the Solomons coastwatchers: ‘... the intelligence signalled from Bougainville ... had saved Guadalcanal, and Guadalcanal had saved the South Pacific’.**

**Although it is not directly part of the history of New Zealand in the war, the work of some individual New Zealanders among the Solomons coastwatchers reporting to the Royal Australian Navy must not pass unrecorded. A District Officer on Santa Isabel, Major D. G. Kennedy, ‘a determined man of middle age with a strong personality’, \* in common with the other members of the Protectorate administration, remained at his post. His reports of Japanese ships off Santa Isabel Island in May 1942 gave the needed warning for the evacuation of Tulagi, the capital of the Solomons Protectorate. Soon afterwards the hiding place of his own motor-boat was betrayed to the Japanese, but he was able to make his way in another vessel to Segi, a plantation on the southern coast of New Georgia, in a position protected by tortuous, uncharted channels through intricate coral reefs. From this new headquarters Kennedy organised coastwatching activities through the adjacent islands. The natives were instructed to avoid all dealings with the enemy and they proved themselves faithful and well-trained. A screen of scouts protected**

Kennedy's own dwelling. Natives watched for hostile aircraft and shipping and penetrated into the surrounding enemy-held territory by hazardous canoe voyages. On the few occasions when Japanese approached **Segi** by sea or by land, they were systematically wiped out to preserve the secret of the location of the headquarters. After the establishment of a Japanese base nine miles away on the same island, a patrol of twenty-five Japanese was sent out to find **Segi**. This patrol was ambushed at night and dispersed. In all these actions fifty-four Japanese were killed, while Kennedy and two natives were wounded.

Another of Kennedy's activities was to rescue airmen shot down over the neighbouring area. He paid the natives a standard reward of a bag of rice and a case of tinned meat for each airman, friend or foe, delivered to **Segi**. Twenty-two **United States** and twenty Japanese airmen were brought in; they were later collected by flying boat.

By November 1942 **Segi** was surrounded by Japanese posts. This did not diminish its value as a base from which scouts were sent to other islands. These reinforcements usually arrived by Catalina. In spite of their conspicuous character the visits of these flying boats never drew Japanese attention to the post. A few weeks before the **United States** attacks on **New Georgia** and **Rendova** in June 1943, extensive reconnaissance of Japanese positions from the land was carried out by

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\* Eric Feldt, *The Coast Watchers* ( **Oxford University Press, Melbourne**), p. 107.

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coastwatchers and native scouts from **Segi**, and a signal staff was sent there to handle the increased traffic. The reconquest of these territories was made much easier by the high quality of the intelligence received from the **Segi** headquarters, and its value was recognised in the award of the Distinguished Service Order to Major Kennedy.

From early in 1943 until May 1944 eleven telegraphists serving in the Royal New Zealand **Navy** were seconded, four at a time, for duty with

the Australian Navy's coastwatching service to remedy a shortage. All of these men served in the parent station at Lunga, **Guadalcanal**, but some also took part in the operations to the north.

Telegraphist G. Carpenter, **RNZN**, was sent forward by canoe from **Segi** to join the coastwatching post on **Rendova** before the assault on the Japanese position on that island. After the successful attack, remnants of the Japanese garrison retreated inland and accidentally hit upon the coastwatchers' post. The handful of coastwatchers held off the Japanese for some hours but retired when the enemy brought up a machine gun. The signals staff had kept on sending messages under fire. As the coastwatchers were leaving it the Japanese rushed the post, and Carpenter had hurriedly to destroy the teleradio by wrenching out the crystals. He was awarded the Distinguished Service Medal for his coolness in this action.

Another New Zealander, Telegraphist T. Witham, **RNZNVR**, was attached to a coastwatching party which went with the United States Marines in November 1943 when they landed at **Torokina, Bougainville**. In action the principal duty of the coastwatchers was to report aircraft sightings. Witham, who had erected new aerials while the post was being bombed, was also awarded the Distinguished Service Medal.

A New Zealand Wesleyan missionary, the Rev. A. W. E. Silvester, who remained at his station on **Vella Lavella** after the Japanese invasion, was closely associated with the coastwatching party established in October 1942 on his island. He rescued many shot-down American airmen. In June 1943, 161 survivors from the cruiser *USS Helena*, sunk in battle with the enemy, reached the island, and Silvester joined with the coastwatchers in collecting the men before they could be caught by Japanese patrols and in organising the scanty local food supply to cope with the large influx. The men were taken off by destroyer a week later. Silvester was afterwards awarded the United States Medal of Merit for these services. \*

\* **Eric Feldt, *The Coast Watchers*. The greater part of this account of the **Solomons** coastwatchers is based on Feldt's account of the coastwatching organisation under the operational control of the **Royal Australian Navy**.**

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# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## THE CAPE EXPEDITION



## *The Cape Expedition*

**THE ESTABLISHMENT** of coastwatching stations on the sub-Antarctic islands several hundred miles south of Stewart Island was known during the war, for purposes of secrecy, as the 'Cape Expedition'.

**War Cabinet** decided in December 1940 that the uninhabited state of these southern islands was a threat to our security and that they should be occupied. It was already suspected that the German merchantman *Erlangen*, 6101 tons, which had sailed from **Dunedin** on 26 August 1939, ostensibly for **Australia** but in fact for South America, had eked out her scanty supply of coal with wood collected at the Auckland Islands. (This suspicion was confirmed when the Cape Expedition reached the Aucklands and discovered areas of newly cut rata forest on the shores of Carnley Harbour, also a cold chisel and chipping hammer with German markings.) The loss of the *Holmwood* and *Rangitane* in November 1940 also indicated that enemy raiders might be using the uninhabited southern islands as bases.

In February 1941 new intelligence hastened the despatch of the occupation parties. On 22 February an enemy pocket battleship was sighted in the **Indian Ocean** steaming south. Following a sighting to the east of **New Guinea** on 16 February of two unidentified southbound ships, \* this report suggested a possible rendezvous between the warship and supply ships somewhere in southern waters. It was conjectured that the aim of the *Admiral Scheer* \*\* (for so the pocket battleship was tentatively identified) was not the destruction of merchant shipping but the showing of the German flag in **Japan**. In the 1914-18 War the German warship *Goeben* had reached **Turkey** from **Germany** through the British blockade and helped the Turks to decide to enter the war against us. The *Admiral Scheer* might have had a similar mission, and it was estimated that she could reach the Auckland Islands from the **Indian Ocean** position, steaming at 15 knots, about 12 March.

Thus, when the small auxiliary schooner *Tagua* sailed from **Wellington** on 5 March with the first members of the expedition, the

margin of time within which the stations might be established was very small. The *Tagua* was sheltering in Port Ross at the northern end of the Auckland Group on 10 March, and on the 13th entered Carnley Harbour. She might well have arrived to find the *Admiral Scheer* or the *Orion* \*\*\* fuelling from a supply ship. This would have been an unpleasant *dénouement* for her passengers and crew, even though it would have meant a hue and cry after the enemy ships. The coastwatchers and the crew of the *Tagua* had been instructed, in the event of meeting the enemy, to pretend to be on a fishing trip or to ‘adopt any other stratagem which you think will throw him off the real object of your party.’

It would have been difficult to convince even moderately suspicious German captors of the civilian innocence of the enterprise when the cargo included radio equipment, portable huts, and stores on a generous scale for a long sojourn in a cold climate. The *Tagua*, with merchant service officers, had eight RNZNVR ratings as seamen. The coastwatchers were civilians. Even if the code-books they carried could have been successfully destroyed, the evidence was enough to show them as civilians engaged upon a military enterprise, and their capture would have qualified them for execution as *francs tireurs*.

No raider appeared during the five years the Cape Expedition was in being. Two ships, both Allied merchantmen, were sighted by the most northerly group of coastwatchers during 1943, one westbound on 21 July, the other eastbound on 15 October. Although the military value of these stations remained negative, they carried out work of a scientific nature that had value for its own sake.

The Cape Expedition, in spite of its accelerated departure, had been carefully planned. The Aerodrome Services Branch of the Public Works Department undertook responsibility for manning the stations, providing the huts and finding suitable sites for them, and collecting the stores; its representative sailed in the *Tagua* in charge of the establishment of the stations.

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\* These were the German auxiliary cruiser *Orion* and her supply ship, the captured Norwegian tanker *Ole Jacob*.

\*\* 10,000 tons, six 11-inch and eight 5.9-inch guns.

\*\*\* The *Orion* and the *Ole Jacob*, en route to the **Indian Ocean**, had rounded New Zealand to the south of Stewart Island on 5 March 1941.

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Although the notice was short, men were found. They had to be used to living in remote places, self-reliant but not self-sufficient, for they had to be co-operative and cheerful. The stations were small, four men at each, increased to five in the second year. At first they were civilians, but all were attested into the Army as privates in December 1942. The adventure itself was the inducement which attracted them.

Because of the rigours of the climate, food had to be provided on a lavish scale. Three years' supply was taken, as it was impossible to estimate when the expedition might be relieved. Clothing was provided in generous quantity, and tools and accessories to deal with every imaginable contingency. Portable pre-fabricated huts with double plywood walls and double windows were erected at the three stations. Each station had a dinghy and outboard motor, and the MV *Ranui* (57 tons) remained in the Aucklands to act as a link between them and, if necessary, the outside world.

In practice it was found that windproof clothing was more important than warm clothing. The temperature never fell very low; it averaged a little under 50 degrees throughout the year. But the islands were almost continuously clouded (an attempt in 1944 to survey them from the air had to be abandoned), and the west wind blew with force and constancy.

Three shore stations were established: No. 1 at Port Ross, No. 2 at Carnley Harbour, in the Aucklands, and No. 3 at Perseverance Harbour, Campbell Island. The *Ranui's* crew of four maintained a shore

observation post at her usual anchorage, Waterfall Inlet, in the **Auckland Islands**.

The first instructions laid stress on concealment. Emergency radio stations were established in the vicinity of each station. The men were encouraged to carry out surveys, to take weather observations, and to interest themselves in the wild life of the islands. They made one signal daily by radio, at staggered hours to decrease the risk of their presence becoming known and the value of their work being compromised.

In June 1942 the stations began reporting weather conditions by daily signal. These reports were so valuable that in the third year trained meteorologists were sent down, and when the coastwatching parties were withdrawn in 1945 the Campbell Island station was retained as a permanent part of New Zealand's weather forecasting service. Geologists and naturalists were members of the second and later reliefs. Surveyors joined the first and second parties, and in the fourth and fifth years a special party of three was at work completing the survey of the groups. In this way much useful work was accomplished as a byproduct of the expedition's main purpose.

The work of the parties, apart from their coastwatching duties, was obviously a help in maintaining morale. Men with strong intellectual interests were likely to be better able to stand the loneliness and privations of sub-Antarctic life than others who could find no special significance in their environment. The health of the men was remarkably good, belying the forebodings with which the first parties were established. A nineteenth-century attempt to colonise the Auckland Islands had failed miserably, and a sheep station on Campbell Island had been abandoned in 1927. Both islands had a bad reputation for the inhospitable conditions in which shipwrecked seamen had had to live and which not all of them survived.

Neither the Aucklands nor Campbell Island were ideal homes. The Aucklands were largely covered with impenetrable rata forest, sprawling horizontally along the ground, and the open areas were peat bog.

**Campbell Island was open tussock, but the sea-elephant wallows made it difficult to walk about freely. The camps attracted an unbelievable number of bluebottles, and clothes, blankets, and ornithological specimens were quickly blown. The fish caught round the coast were too riddled with worms to be eaten. The great humidity of the atmosphere and the lack of sunshine had a depressing effect.**

**The chief compensation of living in the sub-Antarctic (apart from 'time to think', as one coastwatcher put it) was the abundant wild life, particularly seals and sea birds, which gives these coasts their special interest for the zoologist and birdwatcher. On the Aucklands, shooting wild pigs in the bush or wild cattle or blue rabbits on Enderby Island, provided both sport and fresh meat. The mutton from the flocks on Campbell Island was so good that in 1942 forty sheep were landed on Ocean Island, a small island in Port Ross, to supply a better quality of meat to the **Auckland** stations. This fresh food was a major reason for the good health enjoyed by all the men through the five years of the Cape Expedition's occupation.**

**The routine work of keeping the station going absorbed much of the coastwatchers' time. Every man in turn did a day's cooking, firewood had to be cut, and from time to time stores had to be brought up from the beach. 'Coastwatching, conscientiously maintained, is not the relaxed occupation it might seem to be,' \* for in the long daylight of summer a watch extended to six hours daily.**

**The coastwatchers were relieved every year. Some men volunteered to remain or returned after a year's interval; two of them spent three years in the sub-Antarctic.**

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**\* Report by Dr. R. A. Falla, 29 September 1945.**

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# **EPIISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2**

## **THE RECORD OF THE SERVICE**

## *The Record of the Service*

**THE RECORD** of the coastwatchers in the **Pacific** is a proud one. The many steadfastly endured the tedium. The few who were tested in war bore themselves well.

The chief military value of coastwatching stations must always be precautionary. Although in the latter stages of the war in the **Pacific** the stations were reporting the progress of friendly shipping, their information had been vital in the early years. During the critical days after Pearl Harbour, the coastwatching stations supplied news of Japanese movements on the northern fringe of the island screen which could not have been obtained by any other means, for at that time the shortage of aircraft prevented reconnaissance patrols of the forward areas. It was the accident of the decisions of Japanese strategy that the coastwatching stations controlled by New Zealand did not feel the weight of war to the same extent as those in the Australian Navy's area to the west.

The fine response of those coastwatchers who came in contact with the enemy speaks for the spirit, as well as for the efficiency, of the rest. Coastwatching experience embraced both the heat of the tropics and the cold of the sub-Antarctic. The vigil of the coastwatchers in the southern Gilberts after the Japanese conquest of the northern islands of the group, daily expecting capture and daily seeing the enemy's reconnaissance planes in the sky and never their own, was one calling for a type of endurance described by a naval observer as 'cold courage—a rarer thing than courage in action.'

# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## THE ROYAL NEW ZEALAND AIR FORCE IN SOUTH-EAST ASIA 1941-42

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# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

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NEW ZEALAND IN THE SECOND WORLD WAR  
*Official History*



THE RNZAF IN SOUTH-EAST ASIA  
1941-42

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*The Royal New Zealand Air Force  
in South-East Asia 1941-42*

by  
H. R. DEAN

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

# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## [FRONTISPIECE]



FROM THE  
PUBLISHED BY

COVER PHOTOGRAPH

**Pilots of a Buffalo squadron scramble**

**EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2**

**[TITLE PAGE]**

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**WAR HISTORY BRANCH**

**DEPARTMENT OF INTERNAL AFFAIRS WELLINGTON, NEW ZEALAND**

**1952**

# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

[EDITORPAGE]

*VERY few people are aware that New Zealand airmen played a prominent, almost predominant, part in the defence of **Malaya** and **Burma** in 1941–42. It is recorded in this number of the Episodes series, and the record is a very fine one of devoted and desperate service by these youngsters against literally overwhelming odds. Nor is No. 1 Construction Squadron very well known. It gave splendid service in **Malaya**, survived many vicissitudes with sang-froid, and had a remarkable and highly creditable experience on SS Darvel, here related.*

*This is the 20th number of the Episodes and Studies series, to be completed in 24 numbers. Binding cases may be obtained from booksellers.*

**H. K. KIPPENBERGER**

,  
*Major-General*

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

NEW ZEALAND WAR HISTORIES

**EPIISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2**

**OPPOSING THE JAPANESE LANDINGS**

## *Opposing the Japanese Landings*

IN NOVEMBER 1941 there were over 400 **Royal New Zealand Air Force** personnel serving in **Malaya** and **Burma**. The pilots of three fighter squadrons—Nos. 67, 243, and 488—belonged almost entirely to the **RNZAF**, while apart from representatives of the other aircrew categories who were dispersed amongst the bomber and flying boat squadrons, New Zealanders were also engaged on such duties as aerodrome construction, medical, signals, equipment, administration, radar and balloons, and as engineers, armourers and chaplains. Throughout 1941 the threat of war in the **Far East** increased, until towards the end of the year it had become evident that the Japanese were bent on the expansion of their empire. On 1 December 1941 General Headquarters **Malaya** ordered 'second-degree readiness', with all forces warned for operations at short notice.

About half past eleven on the morning of 6 December, the routine reconnaissance flown by Hudsons of No. 1 (General Reconnaissance) Squadron, **Royal Australian Air Force (Far East Command)**, watching the approaches to the Gulf of **Thailand**, reported having sighted two Japanese convoys, consisting of warships and transports, steaming westward approximately eighty miles south-east of Cape Cambodia, the southerly tip of Indo- **China**. Two Hudsons were despatched at 4 p.m. to shadow the convoys until relieved by a Catalina flying boat which, with the aid of radar, was to maintain contact throughout the night. The Japanese were favoured with ideal weather to cover their approach, and in conditions of low cloud, rain and restricted visibility, succeeded in escaping further detection by both Hudsons and the Catalina. For a time it was thought that the convoys had turned north into the Gulf of **Thailand**, but early on 7 December a second Catalina was ordered to search the area in which, from the last-known bearings, the convoys could be expected. No reports were received from this flying boat and it was subsequently learned to have been shot down by the Japanese—the first act of war in the **Far East**.

On 7–8 December 1941 the Japanese struck at **Pearl Harbour** and, nine hours later, at **Manila**. Landings were made in **Thailand** without more than token resistance being offered, and in the early hours of 8 December Japanese troops landed at Kota Bharu and commenced the invasion of **Malaya**. Apart from two RAAF Hudson squadrons and three **Blenheim** squadrons (one of which was caught on the ground by Japanese bombers while refuelling), the only striking force available to oppose the enemy landings consisted of two **Royal Air Force** squadrons, Nos. 36 and 100, both equipped with obsolete Vickers Vildebeeste aircraft and trained for torpedo-bombing. In these two squadrons, which from the outbreak of hostilities usually operated together, were some twenty-five **RNZAF** pilots. The Vildebeeste, with a top speed of 100 miles per hour, was a cumbersome machine with which to attack modern warships with heavy anti-aircraft defensive armament. Throughout the campaign, however, these two squadrons carried out some most gallant and hazardous operations.

The Japanese advance down the Malay Peninsula was supported by a number of seaborne landings on both the east and west coasts. On the morning of 26 January a patrolling Hudson sighted two transports and a number of barges, escorted by two cruisers and eleven destroyers, approaching Endau, on the east coast some eighty miles north of **Singapore**. The Japanese were supporting the landing with land-based fighters operating from Kuantan. A striking force (in which was a strong New Zealand representation) consisting of nine Hudsons of Nos. 1 and 8 (GR) Squadrons, RAAF, together with twenty-one Vildebeestes and three Albacores of Nos. 36 and 100 Squadrons, escorted by nineteen Buffaloes and sixteen Hurricanes, was despatched to dispute the landing. The attack was organised in two waves, but unfortunately, as both Vildebeeste squadrons had been operating throughout the whole of the previous night, the first wave could not be launched until the early afternoon.

The first wave attacked in rather cloudy conditions, but with the arrival of the second wave comprising the Vildebeestes of No. 36



**Squadron, the weather suddenly cleared and enemy fighters intercepted the attacking aircraft before they could reach their target. Nevertheless they continued on their course with great determination, and as a result of the whole operation one cruiser and two destroyers were sunk and two transports set on fire. In addition, twelve Zeros were shot down for the loss of two Hurricanes and one Buffalo.**

**As was to be expected, however, the slow Vildebeestes suffered badly, eleven being shot down, together with two of the three Albacores, the loss including both squadron commanders. Two New Zealand pilots, Sergeants T. S. Tanner <sup>1</sup> A. M. H. Fleming, <sup>2</sup> were killed on this raid. Pilot Officer R. C. Barclay, <sup>3</sup> although shot up by enemy fighters and with his gunner killed, flew through to the target in the face of an intense anti-aircraft barrage put up by the ships. After delivering his attack he was shot down into the sea but, together with his observer, managed to swim ashore. They walked down the coast for two days, when they fell in with the survivors from a sunken destroyer. The whole party then continued on their journey and reached **Singapore** a week later. For his gallantry on this and previous operations Barclay was awarded an immediate DFC.**

**After their heavy losses at Endau neither No. 36 nor No. 100 Squadron was employed in **Malaya** again, both being withdrawn to **Java** to reorganise. They were amalgamated under the title of No. 36 Squadron and based at Tjikampek. They did not have long to wait before being in action again.**

**During the early part of February the Japanese were observed to be building up shipping concentrations at Balik Papan, and on the 26th a convoy of fifty ships was sighted steaming south towards **Sourabaya**. The Vildebeestes were immediately moved to Madioen, near **Sourabaya**, to co-operate with a squadron of American Flying Fortresses.**

**The moon was one day past the full and the wind off shore. All was evidently set for simultaneous landings—one at the eastern end of **Java**, probably just west of **Sourabaya**, and two at the western end in the**

**vicinity of Batavia. No. 36 Squadron attacked the convoy north of Rembang, some 100 miles west of Sourabaya. Most of the pilots claimed hits on transports and execution amongst the barges; in all, eight ships were claimed by the Vildebeestes and a further seven by Fortresses. Once more the squadron suffered heavily and three Vildebeestes, again including that flown by the squadron commander, failed to return. Each air crew of this squadron, operating from a strange airfield, carried out two night attacks in twenty-four hours, involving over fifteen hours' flying in open cockpits—a very fine performance judged by any standards. Throughout the next few days the squadron operated almost without respite, until by 4 March it was reduced to five aircraft, of which four were only just serviceable. Nevertheless, they continued to carry out two sorties every night.**

**Following attacks on Kalidjati during the nights of 5 and 6 March, in which large fires were started and considerable damage inflicted on the enemy, only two aircraft remained serviceable. Orders were given for these to be flown north in an endeavour to reach Burma. They left on 7 March. Both crashed in Sumatra, and the crews were either killed or captured. No. 36 Squadron had literally fought to a finish. Of the New Zealanders, six fell into the hands of the enemy, but the remainder got away to Australia before Java surrendered.**

## **No. 62 (Bomber) Squadron**

**During December eighteen Hudsons and crews, amongst whom were six New Zealanders, had been despatched from Britain to reinforce No. 62 (Bomber) Squadron, whose Blenheim aircraft had suffered heavily in the Malaya fighting. This flight, under the command of Squadron Leader L. G. W. Lilly, <sup>4</sup> RNZAF, arrived in Singapore early in January and immediately began operations. Japanese attacks, however, were now becoming so frequent that the squadron was moved to Sumatra, where operations were carried out from a strip near Palembang, known as P2. For a while these consisted mainly of sea reconnaissance missions, but as the situation deteriorated the Hudsons were employed as a bombing force.**

**On 4 February an attack by Hudsons and Blenheims, with top cover supplied by Hurricanes, was directed against the aerodrome at Kluang, on the mainland of Malaya, from which Japanese fighters were operating. The Hudsons flew to Sembawang on Singapore Island, where the final briefing took place. Enemy snipers were active around the perimeter, and the locality was under artillery fire from the mainland. All six New Zealanders took part in the raid. Led by Lilly, the Hudson formation arrived over the target and observed enemy fighters taking off to intercept. Lilly fired two Very lights, and all bombs were dropped in a pattern as the second signal was given. The target area was well covered and the Japanese, apparently taken by surprise, failed to bring their anti-aircraft guns into action in time. On the way out from the target, however, the Hudsons were attacked by Zeros, and one New Zealand pilot, Sergeant D. Hunter, <sup>5</sup> who was last seen lagging slightly behind the formation, failed to return. The Blenheims and Hurricanes did not appear at the rendezvous point, as just before take-off it was discovered that the breech blocks had been removed from the Hurricanes' guns, and the Blenheims, finding they had no top cover, dropped their bombs on a railway line and returned to base.**

**In the evening of Friday, 13 February, five aircraft of No. 62**

**Squadron were sent to attack a Japanese invasion fleet approaching Sumatra. On this occasion the squadron was led by Flying Officer E. J. Henry, <sup>6</sup> who provides the following account:**

**‘Nobody was very keen to have a go this day, because in the first place the only bombs we had were “GPs” \* while in addition the weather report was very poor, and a night landing would be inevitable. We were all much more keen to make an attack in daylight as it appeared we wouldn't make contact until last light. However, straws were drawn and it was decided that those who didn't go on this show would be airborne at first light the next morning to carry out an attack if contact was made. Airborne at 4 p.m., course was set for Banka Island, and from there a sweep was commenced over the estimated course that the convoy was steering. Before long smoke was sighted on the horizon and the formation dived to sea level, altering course to bring us in for a beam attack. We had been briefed to make a low-level attack, singling out the transports as priority targets.**

**“There was no cloud to speak of and visibility was good. The time was about 5.30 p.m., which left about half an hour until dusk, which was followed very quickly by complete darkness. When we were about five miles away the enemy ships opened up with a very accurate barrage from heavy-calibre guns. Their object appeared to be to put up a barrage a short distance in front of us, hoping that we would be caught in the ensuing spouts of water and explosions. Evasive action was taken and course altered towards the head of the convoy in order to make an attack from the east and obtain benefit from the failing light. The ack-ack was very accurate at this period, and although we were “right down on the deck” and doing about 145 knots, one salvo actually landed in the middle of the formation, which fortunately at this moment was in a very broad “vic”. My turret gunner reported that the other aircraft completely disappeared in a cloud of spray, but they all came through untouched, although one side gunner received a wetting. The formation then pulled up and attacked in a shallow dive. Each aircraft singled out a ship, and I attacked three transports which appeared to be hove to in**

the form of a triangle. Other aircraft attacked the naval ships, consisting of three cruisers and three destroyers. Very little flak came up, and hits were observed on one cruiser and one destroyer, while the transports received near misses. After delivering their attack, the aircraft broke up formation and returned to base independently. On reaching the coast, however, we ran into the usual evening storm with heavy thunder, forked lightning, and a terrific downpour of rain. Radios became useless, beacons were non-existent, and the visibility was nil. Under such conditions it says much for the navigators that four aircraft got into Palembang aerodrome, while the fifth made P2, all without mishap. At Palembang a searchlight in the form of several Aldis lamps was put up as a guide, while the flare path consisted of 44-gallon drums of petrol, lit up and going full bore, fanned by a light breeze.'

The Hudsons were away again next morning with a mixed force of Australian Hudsons and RAF Blenheims to attack the enemy invasion fleet. From this sortie seven aircraft, including four from No. 62 Squadron, failed to return.

After a Japanese parachute attack on Palembang and P2, the aircraft were withdrawn to Java, whence they continued to operate until the island was overrun by the Japanese. Among the RNZAF personnel who served in Sumatra and Java during this period were seven pilots in No. 232 Hurricane Squadron, which had been sent out from England by aircraft carrier to reinforce Singapore. Flight-Lieutenants I. Julian<sup>7</sup> and E. C. Gartrell<sup>8</sup> were awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for gallantry and leadership throughout these bitter actions. Julian, who led the final flight to operate from Java, destroyed at least four enemy aircraft in the air and one on the ground, while Gartrell also had four definite kills to his credit as well as numerous 'probables'. No. 232 Squadron fought on until the surrender, when its gallant personnel passed into captivity.

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\* General purpose

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# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## [SECTION]

IN NOVEMBER 1941 there were over 400 **Royal New Zealand Air Force** personnel serving in **Malaya** and **Burma**. The pilots of three fighter squadrons—Nos. 67, 243, and 488—belonged almost entirely to the **RNZAF**, while apart from representatives of the other aircrew categories who were dispersed amongst the bomber and flying boat squadrons, New Zealanders were also engaged on such duties as aerodrome construction, medical, signals, equipment, administration, radar and balloons, and as engineers, armourers and chaplains. Throughout 1941 the threat of war in the **Far East** increased, until towards the end of the year it had become evident that the Japanese were bent on the expansion of their empire. On 1 December 1941 General Headquarters **Malaya** ordered ‘second-degree readiness’, with all forces warned for operations at short notice.

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During the early part of February the Japanese were observed to be building up shipping concentrations at Balik Papan, and on the 26th a convoy of fifty ships was sighted steaming south towards **Sourabaya**. The Vildebeestes were immediately moved to Madioen, near **Sourabaya**, to co-operate with a squadron of American Flying Fortresses.

The moon was one day past the full and the wind off shore. All was evidently set for simultaneous landings—one at the eastern end of **Java**,

probably just west of **Sourabaya**, and two at the western end in the vicinity of **Batavia**. No. 36 Squadron attacked the convoy north of **Rembang**, some 100 miles west of **Sourabaya**. Most of the pilots claimed hits on transports and execution amongst the barges; in all, eight ships were claimed by the **Vildebeestes** and a further seven by **Fortresses**. Once more the squadron suffered heavily and three **Vildebeestes**, again including that flown by the squadron commander, failed to return. Each air crew of this squadron, operating from a strange airfield, carried out two night attacks in twenty-four hours, involving over fifteen hours' flying in open cockpits—a very fine performance judged by any standards. Throughout the next few days the squadron operated almost without respite, until by 4 March it was reduced to five aircraft, of which four were only just serviceable. Nevertheless, they continued to carry out two sorties every night.

Following attacks on **Kalidjati** during the nights of 5 and 6 March, in which large fires were started and considerable damage inflicted on the enemy, only two aircraft remained serviceable. Orders were given for these to be flown north in an endeavour to reach **Burma**. They left on 7 March. Both crashed in **Sumatra**, and the crews were either killed or captured. No. 36 Squadron had literally fought to a finish. Of the **New Zealanders**, six fell into the hands of the enemy, but the remainder got away to **Australia** before **Java** surrendered.

# **EPIISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2**

## **NO. 62 (BOMBER) SQUADRON**

## **No. 62 (Bomber) Squadron**

**During December eighteen Hudsons and crews, amongst whom were six New Zealanders, had been despatched from Britain to reinforce No. 62 (Bomber) Squadron, whose Blenheim aircraft had suffered heavily in the Malaya fighting. This flight, under the command of Squadron Leader L. G. W. Lilly, <sup>4</sup> RNZAF, arrived in Singapore early in January and immediately began operations. Japanese attacks, however, were now becoming so frequent that the squadron was moved to Sumatra, where operations were carried out from a strip near Palembang, known as P2. For a while these consisted mainly of sea reconnaissance missions, but as the situation deteriorated the Hudsons were employed as a bombing force.**

**On 4 February an attack by Hudsons and Blenheims, with top cover supplied by Hurricanes, was directed against the aerodrome at Kluang, on the mainland of Malaya, from which Japanese fighters were operating. The Hudsons flew to Sembawang on Singapore Island, where the final briefing took place. Enemy snipers were active around the perimeter, and the locality was under artillery fire from the mainland. All six New Zealanders took part in the raid. Led by Lilly, the Hudson formation arrived over the target and observed enemy fighters taking off to intercept. Lilly fired two Very lights, and all bombs were dropped in a pattern as the second signal was given. The target area was well covered and the Japanese, apparently taken by surprise, failed to bring their anti-aircraft guns into action in time. On the way out from the target, however, the Hudsons were attacked by Zeros, and one New Zealand pilot, Sergeant D. Hunter, <sup>5</sup> who was last seen lagging slightly behind the formation, failed to return. The Blenheims and Hurricanes did not appear at the rendezvous point, as just before take-off it was discovered that the breech blocks had been removed from the Hurricanes' guns, and the Blenheims, finding they had no top cover, dropped their bombs on a railway line and returned to base.**

**In the evening of Friday, 13 February, five aircraft of No. 62**

**Squadron were sent to attack a Japanese invasion fleet approaching Sumatra. On this occasion the squadron was led by Flying Officer E. J. Henry, <sup>6</sup> who provides the following account:**

**‘Nobody was very keen to have a go this day, because in the first place the only bombs we had were “GPs” \* while in addition the weather report was very poor, and a night landing would be inevitable. We were all much more keen to make an attack in daylight as it appeared we wouldn't make contact until last light. However, straws were drawn and it was decided that those who didn't go on this show would be airborne at first light the next morning to carry out an attack if contact was made. Airborne at 4 p.m., course was set for Banka Island, and from there a sweep was commenced over the estimated course that the convoy was steering. Before long smoke was sighted on the horizon and the formation dived to sea level, altering course to bring us in for a beam attack. We had been briefed to make a low-level attack, singling out the transports as priority targets.**

**“There was no cloud to speak of and visibility was good. The time was about 5.30 p.m., which left about half an hour until dusk, which was followed very quickly by complete darkness. When we were about five miles away the enemy ships opened up with a very accurate barrage from heavy-calibre guns. Their object appeared to be to put up a barrage a short distance in front of us, hoping that we would be caught in the ensuing spouts of water and explosions. Evasive action was taken and course altered towards the head of the convoy in order to make an attack from the east and obtain benefit from the failing light. The ack-ack was very accurate at this period, and although we were “right down on the deck” and doing about 145 knots, one salvo actually landed in the middle of the formation, which fortunately at this moment was in a very broad “vic”. My turret gunner reported that the other aircraft completely disappeared in a cloud of spray, but they all came through untouched, although one side gunner received a wetting. The formation then pulled up and attacked in a shallow dive. Each aircraft singled out a ship, and I attacked three transports which appeared to be hove to in**

the form of a triangle. Other aircraft attacked the naval ships, consisting of three cruisers and three destroyers. Very little flak came up, and hits were observed on one cruiser and one destroyer, while the transports received near misses. After delivering their attack, the aircraft broke up formation and returned to base independently. On reaching the coast, however, we ran into the usual evening storm with heavy thunder, forked lightning, and a terrific downpour of rain. Radios became useless, beacons were non-existent, and the visibility was nil. Under such conditions it says much for the navigators that four aircraft got into Palembang aerodrome, while the fifth made P2, all without mishap. At Palembang a searchlight in the form of several Aldis lamps was put up as a guide, while the flare path consisted of 44-gallon drums of petrol, lit up and going full bore, fanned by a light breeze.'

The Hudsons were away again next morning with a mixed force of Australian Hudsons and RAF Blenheims to attack the enemy invasion fleet. From this sortie seven aircraft, including four from No. 62 Squadron, failed to return.

After a Japanese parachute attack on Palembang and P2, the aircraft were withdrawn to Java, whence they continued to operate until the island was overrun by the Japanese. Among the RNZAF personnel who served in Sumatra and Java during this period were seven pilots in No. 232 Hurricane Squadron, which had been sent out from England by aircraft carrier to reinforce Singapore. Flight-Lieutenants I. Julian <sup>7</sup> and E. C. Gartrell <sup>8</sup> were awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for gallantry and leadership throughout these bitter actions. Julian, who led the final flight to operate from Java, destroyed at least four enemy aircraft in the air and one on the ground, while Gartrell also had four definite kills to his credit as well as numerous 'probables'. No. 232 Squadron fought on until the surrender, when its gallant personnel passed into captivity.

# **EPIISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2**

## **FIGHTER OPERATIONS**

# *Fighter Operations*



## *Nos. 243 and 488 Squadrons*

Meanwhile in the aerial battle for **Singapore** the New Zealanders were playing a major role. With Royal Air Force resources heavily committed in the European and North African theatres, it was decided to reinforce the Far Eastern Air Force with New Zealand pilots straight from RNZAF Flying Training Schools. Nos. 67 and 243 (Fighter) Squadrons, formed at **Singapore** in April 1941, were brought up to establishment by the inclusion of **RNZAF** personnel, the former squadron being transferred to **Burma** shortly after it had been passed as operationally efficient.

In September 1941 No. 488 Squadron, classed officially as an **RNZAF** 'infiltration' squadron, was formed at **Rongotai** as a complete unit. Comprising 155 officers and airmen, it was the first fighter squadron to be formed in the **Royal New Zealand Air Force**. The Commanding Officer, Squadron Leader W. G. Clouston, DFC, <sup>9</sup> and the two Flight Commanders, Flight Lieutenants J. N. MacKenzie, DFC, <sup>10</sup> and J. R. Hutcheson, <sup>11</sup> were New Zealanders already serving in the **RAF** and were sent out from England to meet the squadron at **Singapore**. The first party from New Zealand, consisting of ninety-six officers and men, arrived at **Singapore** in October and the remainder in November.

Based at **Kallang**, the squadron settled down to an intensive training programme. The pilots, who had had no experience of operational aircraft, were first sent to a training school at Kluang, where they carried out refresher flying on Wirraway aircraft—an Australian version of the Harvard Trainer. After ten days they returned to **Kallang** to convert to American-built Brewster Buffalo fighters and begin operational training in earnest. Flying was carried out under extreme difficulty, as the aircraft allotted to the squadron were 'left-overs' from No. 67 Squadron and were found to be in a bad state of repair. Engines, airframes, instruments, guns, radio equipment, all had to be cleaned, inspected and checked, repairs made, and worn-out parts discarded and replaced. To make matters worse the outgoing squadron had taken with it all tools, spare parts, and accessories.

However, largely through the personal initiative of Flying Officer C. W. Franks,<sup>12</sup> the squadron Equipment Officer, shortages were made up, and after hard work by all hands the aircraft were made serviceable. The weather provided another handicap to the flying programme. At this time of the year frequent heavy tropical thunder showers, which reduced visibility almost to zero, interrupted training and grounded the aircraft.

When war broke out on 7 December, No. 488 Squadron was not yet fully operational, so the initial burden of defending **Singapore** devolved upon No. 243 Squadron, in which twenty-six **RNZAF** pilots were serving. At 4 a.m. on 8 December Japanese bombers raided **Singapore**. They came over high in the clear moonlit sky and were immediately picked up by searchlights. The anti-aircraft defences opened up, but the bombers came on unperturbed to drop their loads on the city and the aerodromes at Tengah and Seletar.

As soon as the sirens went the ground staff and pilots at **Kallang** dashed to the aircraft dispersal bays and warmed up the engines ready for an emergency take-off. At daybreak four members of No. 488 Squadron, led by Hutcheson, took off and carried out the first defensive patrol over **Singapore**. Other pilots continued to patrol throughout the day, but no enemy aircraft appeared. Meanwhile No. 243 Squadron, now fully operational though based at **Kallang**, maintained a detached flight in northern **Malaya** at Kota Bharu.

On the first day of the war Pilot Officer R. S. Shields,<sup>13</sup> in company with an **RAF** pilot, strafed enemy barges on the Kelantan River, and later in the day, while patrolling to intercept a formation of nine bombers, had the first aerial engagement. Shields' sortie report illustrates the difficulties that were to be experienced so frequently with Buffalo aircraft:

‘While at 9000 feet in pursuit of nine enemy bombers, I observed a bomb burst approximately three miles ahead at one o'clock. I immediately turned sharply to port, through 180 degrees, and saw a Japanese aircraft about 1000 feet below me. As a result of my turn I was

coming up on the bomber from astern. I saw it to be a twin-engined aircraft with a single rudder. Its shapely nose was oval and transparent; its body well streamlined although it had no transparent structure above the fuselage just aft the wing. I am unable to identify this aircraft by reference to any silhouette with which I am familiar. The camouflage of the bomber was a single shade of dark green above; a dirty grey-blue colour below. The markings were normal, with the addition of a vertical band of red towards the rear of the rudder. I overhauled the enemy at about 25 m.p.h. As my windshield was covered with oil, I was able to get only occasional glimpses of him. At 350 yards, as near as I could judge in these circumstances, I opened fire. After one burst three of my guns stopped; the remaining gun stopped after two further short bursts. I was unable to see whether, despite his rear gun, the enemy returned my fire. Indeed, I am of the impression that the rear gun was not manned, because the enemy took no evasive action as I approached. Breaking away downwards I returned to the aerodrome, while the enemy aircraft continued on its course to the NE, presumably to Saigon. The combat was broken off ten miles out to sea.'

Also serving with the detached flight at Kota Bharu was another New Zealand pilot, Sergeant C.B. Wareham, <sup>14</sup> who in these early stages of the war began a career as a photographic reconnaissance pilot which was carried on with distinction throughout the later campaign in **India** and **Burma**. In Malaya the Photographic Reconnaissance Flight of Buffaloes carried out over a hundred sorties, most of which ranged as far north as Singora, an important aerodrome in **Thailand** from which the enemy launched all his earlier air attacks. Throughout their operations these Buffaloes carried no armour or guns, and although intercepted and hit by Japanese fighters on numerous occasions, the pilots relied solely on evasive action to get through.

Back in **Singapore** it fell to a Maori, Sergeant B. S. Wipiti, <sup>15</sup> also of No. 243 Squadron, to achieve the honour of shooting down the first Japanese aircraft. During December there was not much daylight activity by the enemy, who confined most of his aerial efforts over

**Singapore** to reconnaissance. Night bombing raids, however, became more frequent, but apart from being uncomfortable and inconvenient caused little damage. No. 488 Squadron, which was not yet considered fully operational, took advantage of the respite to continue its training, and by Christmas nearly all the pilots had been passed as fit for combat flying, although opportunities for aerial gunnery training were scarce. During this period the more experienced pilots were called upon for operational duties, and on 10 December MacKenzie and Sergeant W. J. N. Macintosh <sup>16</sup> were ordered to locate and protect the *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse*, which were being attacked by Japanese high-level and torpedo bombers 170 miles away. By the time they arrived, however, both ships had been sunk, but the Buffaloes provided escort to a destroyer which had rescued survivors and was heading south at full speed. Following up, other members of the squadron, flying in pairs, maintained until dusk a continuous patrol over the oil patches where survivors were still being picked up.

Several times during the month pilots were ordered off the ground in pairs to intercept Japanese reconnaissance aircraft, but the enemy, flying high, always escaped before the Buffaloes could reach them.

On 3 January 1942 No. 488 Squadron flew five patrols, totalling over sixty-four hours, providing cover for a convoy bringing reinforcements into **Singapore**. The weather was bad all the time, with low cloud and periodical rainstorms, which while having the advantage of hiding the convoy from the enemy, at the same time added to the difficulties of locating and escorting the ships. The aircraft had to fly at 1000 feet or less to keep below the cloud. This restricted their range of vision and gave them very little height for manoeuvre.

Although there were no attacks by the enemy, this was the first major operation in which No. 488 Squadron took part. By their excellent flying under most adverse conditions, the pilots proved the value of their training, while on the aerodrome at **Kallang** the ground crews maintained their reputation for hard work and efficiency as they toiled all day checking the aircraft as they came in, refuelling them, and

**making them ready for the next patrol.**

**A second convoy arrived on 13 January bringing, among other forces, fifty-one Hurricane aircraft and twenty fighter pilots. The effect of these reinforcements on morale in Singapore was terrific. The continued advance of the Japanese down the Malayan Peninsula, the apparent ease with which they had disposed of two of Britain's strongest warships, and their superiority in the air had had a most depressing effect. Now, it was thought, the enemy would at least be halted, and the Hurricanes would sweep his air force from the skies. The situation was indeed sufficiently grim. On land the British forces had fallen back to the northern boundary of Johore, barely 100 miles from Singapore. In the air the Japanese had extended their daylight bombing raids to Singapore itself, concentrating on the aerodromes.**

**Tengah was the first attacked, in the first week of the New Year, and Kallang had its first major raid on 9 January. No. 488 Squadron's offices and equipment store and the oil and ammunition stores were hit and practically demolished. As soon as it was over, as much as possible of the stores and equipment was salvaged from the damaged buildings, and when the Japanese returned next day on another raid a great deal had been dispersed and stored in evacuated houses near the aerodrome.**

**The squadron's first fight occurred on 12 January. Eight aircraft, which were standing by at readiness, were ordered to take off to intercept a raid coming south. Led by MacKenzie, they climbed as quickly as possible to the north-west. When they were at 12,000 feet, over Johore, they sighted the enemy force, consisting of twenty-seven fighters, 3000 feet above them. MacKenzie, seeing that he was heavily outnumbered and at a serious disadvantage in height, ordered his pilots to fly into the sun and take evasive action. The enemy spotted them, however, and dived on them en masse.**

**Two New Zealanders, Sergeants T. W. Honan<sup>17</sup> and R. W. MacMillan,<sup>18</sup> were shot down in a few seconds. Both baled out and landed safely fifteen miles from Johore, Honan with a bullet wound in his arm. Five**

other machines were damaged and two other pilots wounded, but all managed to return to **Singapore**. MacKenzie and Sergeant P. E. E. Killick<sup>19</sup> attempted to press home attacks on enemy fighters, but failed to score decisive hits before they were in turn attacked and forced to break off the engagements.

A second formation, consisting of six aircraft led by Hutcheson, took off twenty minutes after MacKenzie. Hutcheson was the only one to make contact with the enemy. He was attacked by a Zero, but after being outmanoeuvred broke off the action. Another member of the squadron, who was flying on patrol with two Dutch pilots, was attacked by six Zeros but escaped into cloud.

Later in the morning MacKenzie and four other pilots flew a further patrol over **Singapore**, and at midday Clouston led all the squadron's remaining serviceable aircraft on another patrol. In the afternoon both flights took off again to intercept enemy raiders, but could not gain enough height to make contact. One aircraft was lost when it crash-landed in a swamp after engine failure, but the pilot, Sergeant V. E. Meaclem,<sup>20</sup> escaped uninjured.

Generally speaking, the Buffalo proved a disappointing aircraft. It did not stand up well to sustained climbing at full throttle, and frequently suffered from loss of power due to a drop in oil pressure and overheating. It could not operate above 25,000 feet, took thirty minutes to get there, and its speed was less than had been expected of it. This, combined with the unexpectedly high performance of the Japanese aircraft, particularly the Zero fighter, was to put the New Zealand squadron at a grave disadvantage during the campaign.

The next day's operations were equally severe, and are well described in the squadron's diary:

At 0630 hours Pilot Officer Hesketh led four aircraft of A Flight on a security patrol, but no contact was made with the enemy. At 1100 hours Flight Lieutenant Hutcheson took off with eight aircraft, some being



from a Dutch squadron, to intercept 30 Type 96 bombers, making contact with them and attacking from astern. The speed of the bombers was such that the Buffalo aircraft could only just overhaul them but could not get into position for beam or overhead attacks. Flight Lieutenant Hutcheson was shot up by rear-gun fire and crash-landed at base. Pilot Officer Greenhalgh attacked an Army 96 bomber. Although only two guns fired, he managed to get smoke from one engine. Pilot Officer Oakden was shot down into the sea by rear-gun fire from a bomber, and was rescued by a Chinese sampan, sustaining slight injuries to his face. Sergeant Clow was shot down in the sea, swam 400 yards to a small island, and was picked up by some Chinese in a sampan and returned to [Kallang](#) two days later. Pilot Officer Hesketh and Pilot Officer Gifford were unable to get sufficient height to attack. Pilot Officer McAneny had to break off his attack through gun failure. Sergeant de Maus was hit before he got within range. The Dutch pilot went missing. Casualties: five aircraft written off and one damaged with no loss to the enemy.

Today, although we did not meet up with the fighters because we did not attack from above, we were badly shot up from rear-gun fire. The Japanese bomber formations of 27 packed aircraft throw out such an accurate and heavy rear-gun barrage that they are very difficult to attack. Some way must be found to break up these mass formations and attack bombers independently. No doubt there was fighter escort in the near vicinity, but it did not pick up our fighters owing to cloudy conditions and also because we attacked from astern.

In the last two days 488 Squadron has lost seven aircraft and had many others damaged, with no loss to the enemy. No blame can be attached to the pilots, who have done their best with Buffaloes. Until we fly as Wings of 36 aircraft we will be unable to inflict heavy damage on the enemy.

The squadron's aircraft strength was now down to fourteen, most of which were damaged. In addition to normal servicing and maintenance work, the ground staffs had to repair machines after every engagement

**to enable them to fly again. From now on the Japanese were over Singapore every day, and as long as they had aircraft to fly, the defending forces went up to meet them.**



## *First Combat Success and Casualty*

No. 488 Squadron had its first combat success, and suffered its first battle casualty, on 15 January. Led by Pilot Officer G. L. Hesketh,<sup>21</sup> the readiness section took off to intercept a raid and was attacked by a swarm of Japanese fighters. Hesketh was shot down and killed by a Japanese fighter, and most of the other pilots had their machines more or less badly damaged. Sergeant E. E. G. Kuhn<sup>22</sup> scored the unit's first victory when he attacked a Type 97 fighter and sent it crashing to the ground.

On 18 January Hutcheson led a successful patrol of pilots from No. 488 Squadron and No. 243 Squadron, **RAF**, which was also stationed at **Kallang**. During a battle with nine Zeros they shot down two, and probably destroyed three more, with no loss to themselves. Pilot Officer N. C. Sharp<sup>23</sup> and Sergeant Killick both sent their opponents down in flames, and Hutcheson and Sergeants Meaclem and Macintosh claimed the probables. A second patrol the same day, also led by Hutcheson, resulted in Sergeant Kuhn shooting down another Zero into the sea and in Hutcheson and Pilot Officer E. W. Cox<sup>24</sup> being shot down. Hutcheson crashed in jungle but was unhurt. Cox was killed.

The next day offensive patrols were flown over the mainland of **Malaya**. MacKenzie and Sergeant H. J. Meharry<sup>25</sup> made a reconnaissance of Kuala Lumpur, 200 miles to the north of **Singapore** and 100 miles inside enemy territory. Taking advantage of cloud cover and forest camouflage, they reached Ramang, fifteen miles north of their objective, unobserved. Then they turned south and flew over Kuala Lumpur. The aerodrome was packed with Japanese fighters and appeared to be the base from which the enemy was attacking **Singapore**. The New Zealanders made two complete circuits before the anti-aircraft guns opened up on them, and then they retired behind the sheltering hills to the westward and returned to **Singapore**. As a result of their reconnaissance Kuala Lumpur was raided that night by a force of Flying Fortresses from **Sumatra**.

From the middle of January until the end of the campaign, Nos. 488 and 243 Squadrons shared between them practically the whole responsibility for the fighter defence of **Singapore**. A Dutch squadron which had been stationed at **Kallang** for a month was withdrawn to **Sumatra**, and the only other fighter units in **Malaya**, Nos. 21 and 453 RAAF Squadrons at Sembawang, were needed for Army co-operation work and bomber escorts.

As a result of continuous losses, the total British air strength by 19 January was only seventy-four serviceable bombers and twenty-eight serviceable fighters. Against these the Japanese were using an estimated 250 bombers and 150 fighters. No serviceable aerodromes remained in British hands on the mainland, and to relieve congestion on **Singapore** all bombers were sent to **Sumatra** or **Java**, leaving only the fighters for local defence.

With such odds against them, the obsolescent, overworked Buffaloes could do little to ward off the ever-increasing weight of Japanese attacks. **Kallang** was heavily raided on 22 January, just as four aircraft were about to take off. Three of them got away safely, amid a cloud of dust and smoke, but the fourth was destroyed by a bomb landing close by and the pilot (Pilot Officer L. R. Farr <sup>26</sup>) was fatally wounded. Two airmen who had been helping to get the aircraft off were killed, and the squadron's headquarters was wrecked. Five airmen distinguished themselves immediately after the raid when, disregarding exploding ammunition, they succeeded in putting out a fire which had started in the armament filling room.

On 23 January Clouston was posted to Headquarters Operations Room, and the command of the squadron passed to MacKenzie, who was shortly afterwards promoted Squadron Leader.

Very few of the original twenty-one Buffaloes were left. The number available for operations varied from day to day between one and four, as the ground staff succeeded in making them serviceable. Too few to operate effectively by themselves, they flew with what was left of No.

**243 Squadron. Even when combined the formations were pitifully weak in comparison with the enemy, but they went up to attack whenever the occasion demanded. The pilots, having learned their experience the hard way, were now fully seasoned fighters and could give an excellent account of themselves.**

**During the next few days No. 488 Squadron was re-equipped with nine Hurricanes from the shipment which had arrived earlier in the month. Changing to a new type of aircraft in the prevailing conditions was not a simple matter. The pilots, in between operations, had to learn to fly them and become acquainted with their characteristics; and the fitters, riggers, and armourers had to familiarise themselves with new equipment, new tools, and new techniques. The ever-present threat of air raids did nothing to help matters. But the change-over was made, and spirits rose all round at the thought of what the pilots could do with modern planes.**

**They were to have little chance of operating in them. At ten o'clock on the morning of 27 January, when all the machines were on the ground refuelling, twenty-seven bombers appeared over the aerodrome with very little warning and everybody had to dive for cover. The bombers dropped their entire load on **Kallang**, destroying two of the new Hurricanes and damaging six others. Eight pilots sheltering in a sandbagged gun emplacement were buried when a bomb burst close by, but were dragged out unhurt. When the raid was over a party of airmen rushed to the hangar to put out a fire, which they got under control with extinguishers and buckets of water. Another party, working among exploding ammunition, carried a quantity of explosives to safety. A third party hurried to give help to No. 243 Squadron which had had most of its Buffaloes destroyed or damaged. Two Blenheims on the aerodrome were completely burnt out, three petrol tankers set on fire, and much motor transport badly damaged. Forty minutes after the first raid, a second wave of twenty-seven bombers came over and again dropped everything they had on **Kallang**. They destroyed two more of No. 243 Squadron's Buffaloes and pitted the aerodrome with craters, making it**

completely unserviceable.

In the next few days the men of the squadron worked feverishly repairing the least damaged of the aircraft and filling in the bomb craters. On 30 January they were able to put three Hurricanes into the air, operating from a single strip which had been cleared. Meanwhile, the situation on the mainland had become rapidly worse. More convoys of reinforcements arrived, but they had come too late to stem the Japanese advance and the British forces were obliged to withdraw to the island of **Singapore**. The causeway between the island and the mainland was blown up soon after dawn on the 31st, after the Army's rearguard had withdrawn across it.



With the enemy in possession of the northern shore of the Strait of Johore, three of **Singapore's** four aerodromes, Tengah, Seletar and Sembawang, became untenable. They were on the north side of the island and were exposed to Japanese artillery fire from a range of less than 2000 yards. **Kallang**, the fourth, was practically unserviceable after repeated bombings, so it was decided to send most of the remaining fighters to **Java** and **Sumatra**, keeping at **Singapore** only eight Hurricanes and the few Buffaloes which were left.

At nine o'clock on the evening of 31 January MacKenzie was told that No. 488 Squadron must be ready to move immediately. Throughout the night, interrupted by frequent air raids, the men prepared for the move. They packed all the Hurricanes' equipment and spares, and their

personal clothing, into cases and loaded it on lorries ready to be taken to the docks. Then they dispersed the lorries in the rubber plantations round the aerodrome and awaited the order to go. The next day they were told they were not to go but were to stay and service the aircraft of No. 232 RAF Squadron which had recently arrived from England. The ground staffs of all other squadrons were being evacuated, and that of No. 488 was the last to remain on the island.

February opened with increasing bombing raids by the Japanese, who were able to attack the aerodromes and the harbour at will. Oil tanks near the Naval Base were hit and blazed furiously, covering the island with a dense pall of black smoke. The few fighters left at **Singapore** and in **Sumatra** could do little more than harass the enemy. They flew almost continuously during the daylight hours, but because of the short warning they received they could rarely catch the bombers before they had dropped their loads. That they were able to operate at all was due to the superhuman efforts of the servicing staffs and the men who repaired the runways after every raid. No. 488 Squadron managed to make four of its Hurricanes serviceable and they were flown out to **Sumatra** on 2 February. In the next few days more machines were repaired and flown out.

On 4 February Pilot Officer P. D. Gifford <sup>27</sup> and Flight Sergeant J. Rees <sup>28</sup> took a party of men to Sembawang to service the aircraft of No. 232 Squadron. They arrived just as the Japanese started shelling the aerodrome from across the Strait. They worked on the aircraft that night, and next morning the pilots took off in a hail of shells and flew all the serviceable ones to **Kallang**. One was hit while taxi-ing out, but the pilot leapt out and dashed to another which he flew off. Later in the day the same party went to Tengah and succeeded in flying all the aircraft there, mostly Hurricanes and Buffaloes, to **Kallang**.

On the evening of 6 February the pilots of the squadron left by ship for **Batavia**, where it was hoped they would be re-equipped with new machines. The ground staff remained to look after No. 232 Squadron,

now at **Kallang**. Raids on the aerodrome were a daily occurrence, but somehow **Kallang** managed to put planes into the air. On 8 February the defending fighters turned back three waves of enemy bombers, and the next day, the last on which operations were flown from **Singapore**, they totalled sixty-four hours on interceptions and patrols.

The Japanese landed on Singapore Island on the night of 8–9 February, and two days later they were well across the island. No. 232 Squadron flew all its serviceable aircraft, which were badly in need of repair, to **Sumatra**, intending to return with new ones. On the morning of 11 February the ground staff went down to the aerodrome as usual, expecting to see them back. They did not appear, so the men returned to their barracks. Reports were received of parties of Japanese infiltrating close to the station, and patrols were sent out. The men were issued with rifles and told to dig in among the rubber trees surrounding the aerodrome. At midday these instructions were cancelled and the squadron was told it would be evacuated by sea that afternoon. The men retired to the docks, taking with them only what personal gear they could carry, and at four o'clock, with bombs falling all around them, went on board the *Empire Star*. At half past six the ship pulled out into the stream and anchored.

After a night of suspense she sailed at half past six next morning for **Batavia**. Two hours out from **Singapore** she was attacked by waves of dive-bombers, which scored three direct hits. Men from No. 488 Squadron manned Lewis guns and others blazed away with rifles, and as a result of their fire one enemy plane was shot down and another damaged. More waves of bombers continued to come over until after midday, but they remained high and scored no more hits. Eventually the battered ship reached **Batavia**, and the men went ashore on 14 February.

The squadron's pilots had arrived in **Java** on the 9th, and most of them had been sent to a rest camp at Buitenzorg, forty miles from **Batavia**. Squadron Leader MacKenzie was put in charge of Hurricane deliveries at Tjililitan aerodrome, ten miles out of the city. He established a temporary base and organised ground crews from among



**RAF** personnel there to check new Hurricanes and harmonise their guns before they were flown to **Palembang**. After two days' rest at Buitenzorg the rest of the pilots joined him and assisted in ferrying aircraft from **Batavia** civil airport, where they had been unpacked from their cases and erected, to Tjililitan.

The ground staff, after reaching **Batavia**, were to have gone to Buitenzorg for a few days, but the situation in **Java** was so serious that they were recalled when on the point of leaving and reported to Tjililitan instead. The aerodrome was now occupied by Nos. 232 and 488 Squadrons, which had twelve Hurricanes between them. No. 232 had been stationed at **Palembang** for a few days after leaving **Singapore**; but the Japanese had landed there on 14 February, and to escape being overrun all air units on **Sumatra** were withdrawn to **Java** next day. On the same day, Sunday 15 February, **Singapore** surrendered.

Until 22 February the two squadrons carried out patrols over **Java** but made no contact with the enemy. The maintenance of twelve aircraft amid the prevailing chaos and disorganisation was, in itself, an achievement. No equipment had been brought from **Singapore**, and tools and spares had to be provided from somewhere. By hunting in the docks and warehouses of **Batavia**, the equipment staff found quantities of goods originally destined for **Malaya**, and so were able to supply what was necessary to the servicing crews.

It was now clear that the Japanese would probably overrun the whole of the **Netherlands** East Indies, for there was very little to stop them. The Dutch had only five bomber, three fighter, and two observation squadrons in **Java**, and in addition there were a few American aircraft and the British squadrons which had been evacuated from **Singapore** and **Sumatra**. All units were depleted after weeks of continuous operations, the serviceability of their aircraft was low, spares and equipment were scarce, and the whole force was disorganised. To avoid their inevitable capture, those units which through lack of equipment could not be profitably employed were as far as possible withdrawn. No. 488 Squadron

was instructed to leave. On 23 February the men went aboard the MV *Deucalion* and sailed for **Australia** the same afternoon.

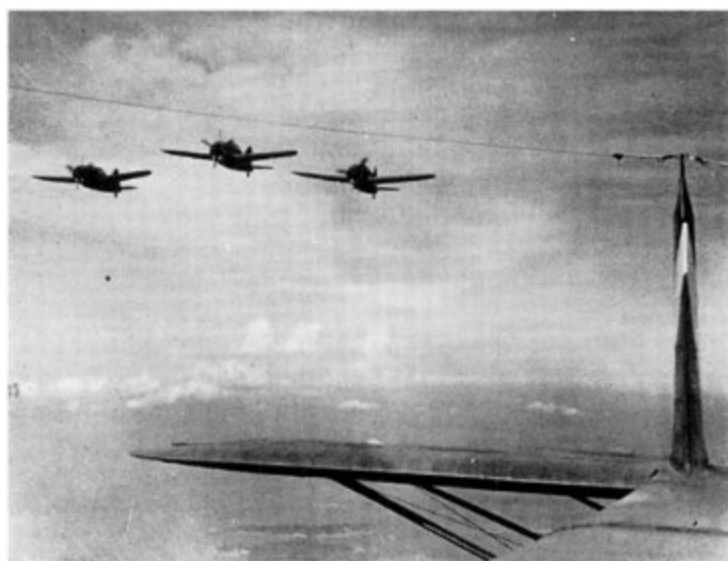
From the time it left New Zealand in September 1941 until it returned at the end of March 1942, the squadron set a record of hard work, resourcefulness, and cheerfulness in the face of

### *Heavy Odds*



A Brewster Buffalo fighter destroyed on the ground during one of the heaviest raids on Kallang airfield

**A Brewster Buffalo fighter destroyed on the ground during one of the heaviest raids on **Kallang** airfield**



Buffaloes in flight, as seen from a Vildebeeste

**Buffaloes in flight, as seen from a Vildebeeste**



A Hawker Hurricane fighter under the trees beside the airfield at Kallang



**A Hawker Hurricane fighter under the trees beside the airfield at Kallang**



Surveying for a bomber aerodrome at Tebrau, Southern Johore

**Surveying for a bomber aerodrome at Tebrau, Southern Johore**



The bomber strip at Tebrau  
nearing completion by No. 1  
Aerodrome Construction  
Squadron

**The bomber strip at Tebrau nearing completion by No. 1 Aerodrome Construction Squadron**



Preparing to evacuate Tebrau for Singapore

**Preparing to evacuate Tebrau for Singapore**



Tents among bber trees of  
Singapore ho irmen evacu-  
ated from Te

**Tents among [ gap — reason: unclear]bber trees of Singapore ho [ gap — reason: unclear]irmen  
evacuated from Te [ gap — reason: unclear]**



An air attack at Singapore on the wharf adjacent to the SS *Talhybius*

An air attack at **Singapore** on the wharf adjacent to the SS *Talhybius*



On the SS *Darvel* before the bombing attack

On the SS *Darvel* before the bombing attack



At Batavia after the journey from Singapore

At Batavia after the journey from **Singapore**



No. 67 SQUADRON GROUP at MINGALADON

—back left to right  
Sergeant C. V. Bargh, Pilot Officer C. McG. Simpson

—front  
Sergeants G. A. Williams, E. E. Pedersen, E. L. Sadler,  
Flying Officer P. M. Bingham-Wallace (RAF), Flying  
Officer C. S. Sharp, Sergeants K. A. Rutherford and  
J. MacPherson.

**No. 67 SQUADRON GROUP at MINGALADON**

**—back left to right**

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**Sergeants G. A. Williams, E. E. Pedersen, E. L. Sadler, Flying Officer P. M. Bingham-Wallace ( **RAF**), Flying Officer C. S. Sharp, Sergeants K. A. Rutherford and J. MacPherson.**



Malayan coolies pushing a Buffalo into its hangar

**Malayan coolies pushing a Buffalo into its hangar**





Sergeant Bargh beside a shot-down Japanese aircraft at **Mingaladon, Burma**

**danger which it would be hard to surpass. At the beginning of the Malayan campaign it was a half-trained, untried unit. At the end Air Vice-Marshal P. C. Maltby, Air Officer Commanding the **Royal Air Force** in **Java**, said of it, 'I consider 488 Squadron as the squadron which has done the best job in **Singapore.**'**

**A paragraph in the despatch of the GOC **Malaya**, Lieutenant-General A. E. Percival, reads as follows:**

**I wish here to pay tribute to the gallant air crews who throughout the later stages of the Malayan campaign went unflinchingly to almost certain death in obsolete aircraft which should have been replaced several years before....**

# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

NOS. 243 AND 488 SQUADRONS

## *Nos. 243 and 488 Squadrons*

Meanwhile in the aerial battle for **Singapore** the New Zealanders were playing a major role. With Royal Air Force resources heavily committed in the European and North African theatres, it was decided to reinforce the Far Eastern Air Force with New Zealand pilots straight from RNZAF Flying Training Schools. Nos. 67 and 243 (Fighter) Squadrons, formed at **Singapore** in April 1941, were brought up to establishment by the inclusion of **RNZAF** personnel, the former squadron being transferred to **Burma** shortly after it had been passed as operationally efficient.

In September 1941 No. 488 Squadron, classed officially as an **RNZAF** 'infiltration' squadron, was formed at **Rongotai** as a complete unit. Comprising 155 officers and airmen, it was the first fighter squadron to be formed in the **Royal New Zealand Air Force**. The Commanding Officer, Squadron Leader W. G. Clouston, DFC, <sup>9</sup> and the two Flight Commanders, Flight Lieutenants J. N. MacKenzie, DFC, <sup>10</sup> and J. R. Hutcheson, <sup>11</sup> were New Zealanders already serving in the **RAF** and were sent out from England to meet the squadron at **Singapore**. The first party from New Zealand, consisting of ninety-six officers and men, arrived at **Singapore** in October and the remainder in November.

Based at **Kallang**, the squadron settled down to an intensive training programme. The pilots, who had had no experience of operational aircraft, were first sent to a training school at Kluang, where they carried out refresher flying on Wirraway aircraft—an Australian version of the Harvard Trainer. After ten days they returned to **Kallang** to convert to American-built Brewster Buffalo fighters and begin operational training in earnest. Flying was carried out under extreme difficulty, as the aircraft allotted to the squadron were 'left-overs' from No. 67 Squadron and were found to be in a bad state of repair. Engines, airframes, instruments, guns, radio equipment, all had to be cleaned, inspected and checked, repairs made, and worn-out parts discarded and replaced. To make matters worse the outgoing squadron had taken with it all tools, spare parts, and accessories.

However, largely through the personal initiative of Flying Officer C. W. Franks,<sup>12</sup> the squadron Equipment Officer, shortages were made up, and after hard work by all hands the aircraft were made serviceable. The weather provided another handicap to the flying programme. At this time of the year frequent heavy tropical thunder showers, which reduced visibility almost to zero, interrupted training and grounded the aircraft.

When war broke out on 7 December, No. 488 Squadron was not yet fully operational, so the initial burden of defending **Singapore** devolved upon No. 243 Squadron, in which twenty-six **RNZAF** pilots were serving. At 4 a.m. on 8 December Japanese bombers raided **Singapore**. They came over high in the clear moonlit sky and were immediately picked up by searchlights. The anti-aircraft defences opened up, but the bombers came on unperturbed to drop their loads on the city and the aerodromes at Tengah and Seletar.

As soon as the sirens went the ground staff and pilots at **Kallang** dashed to the aircraft dispersal bays and warmed up the engines ready for an emergency take-off. At daybreak four members of No. 488 Squadron, led by Hutcheson, took off and carried out the first defensive patrol over **Singapore**. Other pilots continued to patrol throughout the day, but no enemy aircraft appeared. Meanwhile No. 243 Squadron, now fully operational though based at **Kallang**, maintained a detached flight in northern **Malaya** at Kota Bharu.

On the first day of the war Pilot Officer R. S. Shields,<sup>13</sup> in company with an **RAF** pilot, strafed enemy barges on the Kelantan River, and later in the day, while patrolling to intercept a formation of nine bombers, had the first aerial engagement. Shields' sortie report illustrates the difficulties that were to be experienced so frequently with Buffalo aircraft:

‘While at 9000 feet in pursuit of nine enemy bombers, I observed a bomb burst approximately three miles ahead at one o'clock. I immediately turned sharply to port, through 180 degrees, and saw a Japanese aircraft about 1000 feet below me. As a result of my turn I was



coming up on the bomber from astern. I saw it to be a twin-engined aircraft with a single rudder. Its shapely nose was oval and transparent; its body well streamlined although it had no transparent structure above the fuselage just aft the wing. I am unable to identify this aircraft by reference to any silhouette with which I am familiar. The camouflage of the bomber was a single shade of dark green above; a dirty grey-blue colour below. The markings were normal, with the addition of a vertical band of red towards the rear of the rudder. I overhauled the enemy at about 25 m.p.h. As my windshield was covered with oil, I was able to get only occasional glimpses of him. At 350 yards, as near as I could judge in these circumstances, I opened fire. After one burst three of my guns stopped; the remaining gun stopped after two further short bursts. I was unable to see whether, despite his rear gun, the enemy returned my fire. Indeed, I am of the impression that the rear gun was not manned, because the enemy took no evasive action as I approached. Breaking away downwards I returned to the aerodrome, while the enemy aircraft continued on its course to the NE, presumably to Saigon. The combat was broken off ten miles out to sea.'

Also serving with the detached flight at Kota Bharu was another New Zealand pilot, Sergeant C.B. Wareham, <sup>14</sup> who in these early stages of the war began a career as a photographic reconnaissance pilot which was carried on with distinction throughout the later campaign in **India** and **Burma**. In Malaya the Photographic Reconnaissance Flight of Buffaloes carried out over a hundred sorties, most of which ranged as far north as Singora, an important aerodrome in **Thailand** from which the enemy launched all his earlier air attacks. Throughout their operations these Buffaloes carried no armour or guns, and although intercepted and hit by Japanese fighters on numerous occasions, the pilots relied solely on evasive action to get through.

Back in **Singapore** it fell to a Maori, Sergeant B. S. Wipiti, <sup>15</sup> also of No. 243 Squadron, to achieve the honour of shooting down the first Japanese aircraft. During December there was not much daylight activity by the enemy, who confined most of his aerial efforts over

**Singapore** to reconnaissance. Night bombing raids, however, became more frequent, but apart from being uncomfortable and inconvenient caused little damage. No. 488 Squadron, which was not yet considered fully operational, took advantage of the respite to continue its training, and by Christmas nearly all the pilots had been passed as fit for combat flying, although opportunities for aerial gunnery training were scarce. During this period the more experienced pilots were called upon for operational duties, and on 10 December MacKenzie and Sergeant W. J. N. Macintosh <sup>16</sup> were ordered to locate and protect the *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse*, which were being attacked by Japanese high-level and torpedo bombers 170 miles away. By the time they arrived, however, both ships had been sunk, but the Buffaloes provided escort to a destroyer which had rescued survivors and was heading south at full speed. Following up, other members of the squadron, flying in pairs, maintained until dusk a continuous patrol over the oil patches where survivors were still being picked up.

Several times during the month pilots were ordered off the ground in pairs to intercept Japanese reconnaissance aircraft, but the enemy, flying high, always escaped before the Buffaloes could reach them.

On 3 January 1942 No. 488 Squadron flew five patrols, totalling over sixty-four hours, providing cover for a convoy bringing reinforcements into **Singapore**. The weather was bad all the time, with low cloud and periodical rainstorms, which while having the advantage of hiding the convoy from the enemy, at the same time added to the difficulties of locating and escorting the ships. The aircraft had to fly at 1000 feet or less to keep below the cloud. This restricted their range of vision and gave them very little height for manoeuvre.

Although there were no attacks by the enemy, this was the first major operation in which No. 488 Squadron took part. By their excellent flying under most adverse conditions, the pilots proved the value of their training, while on the aerodrome at **Kallang** the ground crews maintained their reputation for hard work and efficiency as they toiled all day checking the aircraft as they came in, refuelling them, and

**making them ready for the next patrol.**

**A second convoy arrived on 13 January bringing, among other forces, fifty-one Hurricane aircraft and twenty fighter pilots. The effect of these reinforcements on morale in **Singapore** was terrific. The continued advance of the Japanese down the Malayan Peninsula, the apparent ease with which they had disposed of two of **Britain's** strongest warships, and their superiority in the air had had a most depressing effect. Now, it was thought, the enemy would at least be halted, and the Hurricanes would sweep his air force from the skies. The situation was indeed sufficiently grim. On land the British forces had fallen back to the northern boundary of Johore, barely 100 miles from **Singapore**. In the air the Japanese had extended their daylight bombing raids to **Singapore** itself, concentrating on the aerodromes.**

**Tengah was the first attacked, in the first week of the New Year, and **Kallang** had its first major raid on 9 January. No. 488 Squadron's offices and equipment store and the oil and ammunition stores were hit and practically demolished. As soon as it was over, as much as possible of the stores and equipment was salvaged from the damaged buildings, and when the Japanese returned next day on another raid a great deal had been dispersed and stored in evacuated houses near the aerodrome.**

**The squadron's first fight occurred on 12 January. Eight aircraft, which were standing by at readiness, were ordered to take off to intercept a raid coming south. Led by MacKenzie, they climbed as quickly as possible to the north-west. When they were at 12,000 feet, over Johore, they sighted the enemy force, consisting of twenty-seven fighters, 3000 feet above them. MacKenzie, seeing that he was heavily outnumbered and at a serious disadvantage in height, ordered his pilots to fly into the sun and take evasive action. The enemy spotted them, however, and dived on them en masse.**

**Two New Zealanders, Sergeants T. W. Honan <sup>17</sup> and R. W. MacMillan, <sup>18</sup> were shot down in a few seconds. Both baled out and landed safely fifteen miles from Johore, Honan with a bullet wound in his arm. Five**

other machines were damaged and two other pilots wounded, but all managed to return to **Singapore**. MacKenzie and Sergeant P. E. E. Killick<sup>19</sup> attempted to press home attacks on enemy fighters, but failed to score decisive hits before they were in turn attacked and forced to break off the engagements.

A second formation, consisting of six aircraft led by Hutcheson, took off twenty minutes after MacKenzie. Hutcheson was the only one to make contact with the enemy. He was attacked by a Zero, but after being outmanoeuvred broke off the action. Another member of the squadron, who was flying on patrol with two Dutch pilots, was attacked by six Zeros but escaped into cloud.

Later in the morning MacKenzie and four other pilots flew a further patrol over **Singapore**, and at midday Clouston led all the squadron's remaining serviceable aircraft on another patrol. In the afternoon both flights took off again to intercept enemy raiders, but could not gain enough height to make contact. One aircraft was lost when it crash-landed in a swamp after engine failure, but the pilot, Sergeant V. E. Meaclem,<sup>20</sup> escaped uninjured.

Generally speaking, the Buffalo proved a disappointing aircraft. It did not stand up well to sustained climbing at full throttle, and frequently suffered from loss of power due to a drop in oil pressure and overheating. It could not operate above 25,000 feet, took thirty minutes to get there, and its speed was less than had been expected of it. This, combined with the unexpectedly high performance of the Japanese aircraft, particularly the Zero fighter, was to put the New Zealand squadron at a grave disadvantage during the campaign.

The next day's operations were equally severe, and are well described in the squadron's diary:

At 0630 hours Pilot Officer Hesketh led four aircraft of A Flight on a security patrol, but no contact was made with the enemy. At 1100 hours Flight Lieutenant Hutcheson took off with eight aircraft, some being

from a Dutch squadron, to intercept 30 Type 96 bombers, making contact with them and attacking from astern. The speed of the bombers was such that the Buffalo aircraft could only just overhaul them but could not get into position for beam or overhead attacks. Flight Lieutenant Hutcheson was shot up by rear-gun fire and crash-landed at base. Pilot Officer Greenhalgh attacked an Army 96 bomber. Although only two guns fired, he managed to get smoke from one engine. Pilot Officer Oakden was shot down into the sea by rear-gun fire from a bomber, and was rescued by a Chinese sampan, sustaining slight injuries to his face. Sergeant Clow was shot down in the sea, swam 400 yards to a small island, and was picked up by some Chinese in a sampan and returned to [Kallang](#) two days later. Pilot Officer Hesketh and Pilot Officer Gifford were unable to get sufficient height to attack. Pilot Officer McAneny had to break off his attack through gun failure. Sergeant de Maus was hit before he got within range. The Dutch pilot went missing. Casualties: five aircraft written off and one damaged with no loss to the enemy.

Today, although we did not meet up with the fighters because we did not attack from above, we were badly shot up from rear-gun fire. The Japanese bomber formations of 27 packed aircraft throw out such an accurate and heavy rear-gun barrage that they are very difficult to attack. Some way must be found to break up these mass formations and attack bombers independently. No doubt there was fighter escort in the near vicinity, but it did not pick up our fighters owing to cloudy conditions and also because we attacked from astern.

In the last two days 488 Squadron has lost seven aircraft and had many others damaged, with no loss to the enemy. No blame can be attached to the pilots, who have done their best with Buffaloes. Until we fly as Wings of 36 aircraft we will be unable to inflict heavy damage on the enemy.

The squadron's aircraft strength was now down to fourteen, most of which were damaged. In addition to normal servicing and maintenance work, the ground staffs had to repair machines after every engagement

**to enable them to fly again. From now on the Japanese were over Singapore every day, and as long as they had aircraft to fly, the defending forces went up to meet them.**

# **EPIISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2**

## **FIRST COMBAT SUCCESS AND CASUALTY**

## *First Combat Success and Casualty*

No. 488 Squadron had its first combat success, and suffered its first battle casualty, on 15 January. Led by Pilot Officer G. L. Hesketh,<sup>21</sup> the readiness section took off to intercept a raid and was attacked by a swarm of Japanese fighters. Hesketh was shot down and killed by a Japanese fighter, and most of the other pilots had their machines more or less badly damaged. Sergeant E. E. G. Kuhn<sup>22</sup> scored the unit's first victory when he attacked a Type 97 fighter and sent it crashing to the ground.

On 18 January Hutcheson led a successful patrol of pilots from No. 488 Squadron and No. 243 Squadron, **RAF**, which was also stationed at **Kallang**. During a battle with nine Zeros they shot down two, and probably destroyed three more, with no loss to themselves. Pilot Officer N. C. Sharp<sup>23</sup> and Sergeant Killick both sent their opponents down in flames, and Hutcheson and Sergeants Meaclem and Macintosh claimed the probables. A second patrol the same day, also led by Hutcheson, resulted in Sergeant Kuhn shooting down another Zero into the sea and in Hutcheson and Pilot Officer E. W. Cox<sup>24</sup> being shot down. Hutcheson crashed in jungle but was unhurt. Cox was killed.

The next day offensive patrols were flown over the mainland of **Malaya**. MacKenzie and Sergeant H. J. Meharry<sup>25</sup> made a reconnaissance of Kuala Lumpur, 200 miles to the north of **Singapore** and 100 miles inside enemy territory. Taking advantage of cloud cover and forest camouflage, they reached Ramang, fifteen miles north of their objective, unobserved. Then they turned south and flew over Kuala Lumpur. The aerodrome was packed with Japanese fighters and appeared to be the base from which the enemy was attacking **Singapore**. The New Zealanders made two complete circuits before the anti-aircraft guns opened up on them, and then they retired behind the sheltering hills to the westward and returned to **Singapore**. As a result of their reconnaissance Kuala Lumpur was raided that night by a force of Flying Fortresses from **Sumatra**.



From the middle of January until the end of the campaign, Nos. 488 and 243 Squadrons shared between them practically the whole responsibility for the fighter defence of **Singapore**. A Dutch squadron which had been stationed at **Kallang** for a month was withdrawn to **Sumatra**, and the only other fighter units in **Malaya**, Nos. 21 and 453 RAAF Squadrons at Sembawang, were needed for Army co-operation work and bomber escorts.

As a result of continuous losses, the total British air strength by 19 January was only seventy-four serviceable bombers and twenty-eight serviceable fighters. Against these the Japanese were using an estimated 250 bombers and 150 fighters. No serviceable aerodromes remained in British hands on the mainland, and to relieve congestion on **Singapore** all bombers were sent to **Sumatra** or **Java**, leaving only the fighters for local defence.

With such odds against them, the obsolescent, overworked Buffaloes could do little to ward off the ever-increasing weight of Japanese attacks. **Kallang** was heavily raided on 22 January, just as four aircraft were about to take off. Three of them got away safely, amid a cloud of dust and smoke, but the fourth was destroyed by a bomb landing close by and the pilot (Pilot Officer L. R. Farr <sup>26</sup>) was fatally wounded. Two airmen who had been helping to get the aircraft off were killed, and the squadron's headquarters was wrecked. Five airmen distinguished themselves immediately after the raid when, disregarding exploding ammunition, they succeeded in putting out a fire which had started in the armament filling room.

On 23 January Clouston was posted to Headquarters Operations Room, and the command of the squadron passed to MacKenzie, who was shortly afterwards promoted Squadron Leader.

Very few of the original twenty-one Buffaloes were left. The number available for operations varied from day to day between one and four, as the ground staff succeeded in making them serviceable. Too few to operate effectively by themselves, they flew with what was left of No.

**243 Squadron. Even when combined the formations were pitifully weak in comparison with the enemy, but they went up to attack whenever the occasion demanded. The pilots, having learned their experience the hard way, were now fully seasoned fighters and could give an excellent account of themselves.**

**During the next few days No. 488 Squadron was re-equipped with nine Hurricanes from the shipment which had arrived earlier in the month. Changing to a new type of aircraft in the prevailing conditions was not a simple matter. The pilots, in between operations, had to learn to fly them and become acquainted with their characteristics; and the fitters, riggers, and armourers had to familiarise themselves with new equipment, new tools, and new techniques. The ever-present threat of air raids did nothing to help matters. But the change-over was made, and spirits rose all round at the thought of what the pilots could do with modern planes.**

**They were to have little chance of operating in them. At ten o'clock on the morning of 27 January, when all the machines were on the ground refuelling, twenty-seven bombers appeared over the aerodrome with very little warning and everybody had to dive for cover. The bombers dropped their entire load on **Kallang**, destroying two of the new Hurricanes and damaging six others. Eight pilots sheltering in a sandbagged gun emplacement were buried when a bomb burst close by, but were dragged out unhurt. When the raid was over a party of airmen rushed to the hangar to put out a fire, which they got under control with extinguishers and buckets of water. Another party, working among exploding ammunition, carried a quantity of explosives to safety. A third party hurried to give help to No. 243 Squadron which had had most of its Buffaloes destroyed or damaged. Two Blenheims on the aerodrome were completely burnt out, three petrol tankers set on fire, and much motor transport badly damaged. Forty minutes after the first raid, a second wave of twenty-seven bombers came over and again dropped everything they had on **Kallang**. They destroyed two more of No. 243 Squadron's Buffaloes and pitted the aerodrome with craters, making it**

completely unserviceable.

In the next few days the men of the squadron worked feverishly repairing the least damaged of the aircraft and filling in the bomb craters. On 30 January they were able to put three Hurricanes into the air, operating from a single strip which had been cleared. Meanwhile, the situation on the mainland had become rapidly worse. More convoys of reinforcements arrived, but they had come too late to stem the Japanese advance and the British forces were obliged to withdraw to the island of **Singapore**. The causeway between the island and the mainland was blown up soon after dawn on the 31st, after the Army's rearguard had withdrawn across it.



With the enemy in possession of the northern shore of the Strait of Johore, three of **Singapore's** four aerodromes, Tengah, Seletar and Sembawang, became untenable. They were on the north side of the island and were exposed to Japanese artillery fire from a range of less than 2000 yards. **Kallang**, the fourth, was practically unserviceable after repeated bombings, so it was decided to send most of the remaining fighters to **Java** and **Sumatra**, keeping at **Singapore** only eight Hurricanes and the few Buffaloes which were left.

At nine o'clock on the evening of 31 January MacKenzie was told that No. 488 Squadron must be ready to move immediately. Throughout the night, interrupted by frequent air raids, the men prepared for the move. They packed all the Hurricanes' equipment and spares, and their

personal clothing, into cases and loaded it on lorries ready to be taken to the docks. Then they dispersed the lorries in the rubber plantations round the aerodrome and awaited the order to go. The next day they were told they were not to go but were to stay and service the aircraft of No. 232 RAF Squadron which had recently arrived from England. The ground staffs of all other squadrons were being evacuated, and that of No. 488 was the last to remain on the island.

February opened with increasing bombing raids by the Japanese, who were able to attack the aerodromes and the harbour at will. Oil tanks near the Naval Base were hit and blazed furiously, covering the island with a dense pall of black smoke. The few fighters left at **Singapore** and in **Sumatra** could do little more than harass the enemy. They flew almost continuously during the daylight hours, but because of the short warning they received they could rarely catch the bombers before they had dropped their loads. That they were able to operate at all was due to the superhuman efforts of the servicing staffs and the men who repaired the runways after every raid. No. 488 Squadron managed to make four of its Hurricanes serviceable and they were flown out to **Sumatra** on 2 February. In the next few days more machines were repaired and flown out.

On 4 February Pilot Officer P. D. Gifford <sup>27</sup> and Flight Sergeant J. Rees <sup>28</sup> took a party of men to Sembawang to service the aircraft of No. 232 Squadron. They arrived just as the Japanese started shelling the aerodrome from across the Strait. They worked on the aircraft that night, and next morning the pilots took off in a hail of shells and flew all the serviceable ones to **Kallang**. One was hit while taxi-ing out, but the pilot leapt out and dashed to another which he flew off. Later in the day the same party went to Tengah and succeeded in flying all the aircraft there, mostly Hurricanes and Buffaloes, to **Kallang**.

On the evening of 6 February the pilots of the squadron left by ship for **Batavia**, where it was hoped they would be re-equipped with new machines. The ground staff remained to look after No. 232 Squadron,

now at **Kallang**. Raids on the aerodrome were a daily occurrence, but somehow **Kallang** managed to put planes into the air. On 8 February the defending fighters turned back three waves of enemy bombers, and the next day, the last on which operations were flown from **Singapore**, they totalled sixty-four hours on interceptions and patrols.

The Japanese landed on Singapore Island on the night of 8–9 February, and two days later they were well across the island. No. 232 Squadron flew all its serviceable aircraft, which were badly in need of repair, to **Sumatra**, intending to return with new ones. On the morning of 11 February the ground staff went down to the aerodrome as usual, expecting to see them back. They did not appear, so the men returned to their barracks. Reports were received of parties of Japanese infiltrating close to the station, and patrols were sent out. The men were issued with rifles and told to dig in among the rubber trees surrounding the aerodrome. At midday these instructions were cancelled and the squadron was told it would be evacuated by sea that afternoon. The men retired to the docks, taking with them only what personal gear they could carry, and at four o'clock, with bombs falling all around them, went on board the *Empire Star*. At half past six the ship pulled out into the stream and anchored.

After a night of suspense she sailed at half past six next morning for **Batavia**. Two hours out from **Singapore** she was attacked by waves of dive-bombers, which scored three direct hits. Men from No. 488 Squadron manned Lewis guns and others blazed away with rifles, and as a result of their fire one enemy plane was shot down and another damaged. More waves of bombers continued to come over until after midday, but they remained high and scored no more hits. Eventually the battered ship reached **Batavia**, and the men went ashore on 14 February.

The squadron's pilots had arrived in **Java** on the 9th, and most of them had been sent to a rest camp at Buitenzorg, forty miles from **Batavia**. Squadron Leader MacKenzie was put in charge of Hurricane deliveries at Tjililitan aerodrome, ten miles out of the city. He established a temporary base and organised ground crews from among

**RAF** personnel there to check new Hurricanes and harmonise their guns before they were flown to **Palembang**. After two days' rest at Buitenzorg the rest of the pilots joined him and assisted in ferrying aircraft from **Batavia** civil airport, where they had been unpacked from their cases and erected, to Tjililitan.

The ground staff, after reaching **Batavia**, were to have gone to Buitenzorg for a few days, but the situation in **Java** was so serious that they were recalled when on the point of leaving and reported to Tjililitan instead. The aerodrome was now occupied by Nos. 232 and 488 Squadrons, which had twelve Hurricanes between them. No. 232 had been stationed at **Palembang** for a few days after leaving **Singapore**; but the Japanese had landed there on 14 February, and to escape being overrun all air units on **Sumatra** were withdrawn to **Java** next day. On the same day, Sunday 15 February, **Singapore** surrendered.

Until 22 February the two squadrons carried out patrols over **Java** but made no contact with the enemy. The maintenance of twelve aircraft amid the prevailing chaos and disorganisation was, in itself, an achievement. No equipment had been brought from **Singapore**, and tools and spares had to be provided from somewhere. By hunting in the docks and warehouses of **Batavia**, the equipment staff found quantities of goods originally destined for **Malaya**, and so were able to supply what was necessary to the servicing crews.

It was now clear that the Japanese would probably overrun the whole of the **Netherlands** East Indies, for there was very little to stop them. The Dutch had only five bomber, three fighter, and two observation squadrons in **Java**, and in addition there were a few American aircraft and the British squadrons which had been evacuated from **Singapore** and **Sumatra**. All units were depleted after weeks of continuous operations, the serviceability of their aircraft was low, spares and equipment were scarce, and the whole force was disorganised. To avoid their inevitable capture, those units which through lack of equipment could not be profitably employed were as far as possible withdrawn. No. 488 Squadron



was instructed to leave. On 23 February the men went aboard the MV *Deucalion* and sailed for **Australia** the same afternoon.

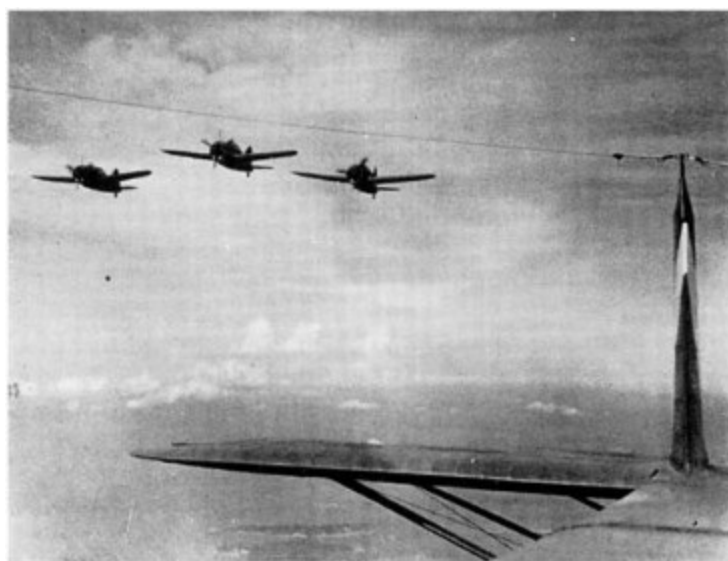
From the time it left New Zealand in September 1941 until it returned at the end of March 1942, the squadron set a record of hard work, resourcefulness, and cheerfulness in the face of

### *Heavy Odds*



A Brewster Buffalo fighter destroyed on the ground during one of the heaviest raids on Kallang airfield

**A Brewster Buffalo fighter destroyed on the ground during one of the heaviest raids on **Kallang** airfield**



Buffaloes in flight, as seen from a Vildebeeste

**Buffaloes in flight, as seen from a Vildebeeste**

A Hawker Hurricane fighter under the trees beside the airfield at Kallang



**A Hawker Hurricane fighter under the trees beside the airfield at Kallang**



Surveying for a bomber aerodrome at Tebrau, Southern Johore

**Surveying for a bomber aerodrome at Tebrau, Southern Johore**



The bomber strip at Tebrau  
nearing completion by No. 1  
Aerodrome Construction  
Squadron

**The bomber strip at Tebrau nearing completion by No. 1 Aerodrome Construction Squadron**





Preparing to evacuate Tebrau for Singapore

**Preparing to evacuate Tebrau for Singapore**



Tents among bber trees of Singapore ho irmen evacuated from Te

**Tents among [ gap — reason: unclear]bber trees of Singapore ho [ gap — reason: unclear]irmen evacuated from Te [ gap — reason: unclear]**



An air attack at Singapore on the wharf adjacent to the SS *Talhybius*

An air attack at **Singapore** on the wharf adjacent to the SS *Talhybius*



On the SS *Darvel* before the bombing attack

On the SS *Darvel* before the bombing attack



At Batavia after the journey from Singapore

At Batavia after the journey from **Singapore**



No. 67 SQUADRON GROUP at MINGALADON

—back left to right  
Sergeant C. V. Bargh, Pilot Officer C. McG. Simpson

—front  
Sergeants G. A. Williams, E. E. Pedersen, E. L. Sadler,  
Flying Officer P. M. Bingham-Wallace (RAF), Flying  
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Malayan coolies pushing a Buffalo into its hangar

**Malayan coolies pushing a Buffalo into its hangar**



Sergeant Bargh beside a shot-down Japanese aircraft at **Mingaladon, Burma**

**danger which it would be hard to surpass. At the beginning of the Malayan campaign it was a half-trained, untried unit. At the end Air Vice-Marshal P. C. Maltby, Air Officer Commanding the **Royal Air Force** in **Java**, said of it, 'I consider 488 Squadron as the squadron which has done the best job in **Singapore**.'**

**A paragraph in the despatch of the GOC **Malaya**, Lieutenant-General A. E. Percival, reads as follows:**

**I wish here to pay tribute to the gallant air crews who throughout the later stages of the Malayan campaign went unflinchingly to almost certain death in obsolete aircraft which should have been replaced several years before....**

# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## BUILDING THE AIRFIELDS

# ***Building the Airfields***

## **No. 1 Aerodrome Construction Squadron**

**No. 1 Aerodrome Construction Squadron**, the first unit of its kind in the Air Forces of the British Empire, was formed in New Zealand in July 1941. It was sent to **Malaya** to help in the building of airstrips which were urgently needed as part of the defence system of **Singapore**.

Airfield construction was one of the major problems confronting the British command in **Malaya**. Suitable sites were hard to find, and there was a shortage of the necessary labour and machinery to develop them. Unskilled native manpower was available, but it was scarce and unreliable. There were very few men trained in the handling of heavy earth-moving machinery. The New Zealand Squadron, therefore, was to fill an important role in the defence preparations of the peninsula.

The men were recruited from all over New Zealand. They came from the Public Works Department, from private construction companies, and from the ranks of those already enlisted in the **Air Force**. Unlike the usual run of recruits who joined the **Air Force** in their early twenties, these were men of up to forty-five years of age, specially selected for their skill in the various trades and for their physical toughness and ability to do heavy work in tropical conditions. After assembling at **Rongotai** they were issued with tropical kit, and then, while waiting for shipping to take them overseas, were given an intensive course in drill, rifle and machine-gun training, and lectures on discipline, hygiene, etc. At the same time, most of the construction machinery in the country was gathered in **Wellington**, to be sent with the unit when it sailed.

An advanced party of four officers and fifteen airmen, who formed the Survey Section, left New Zealand towards the end of July in the Dutch ship *Maetsuyker* and reached **Singapore** on 15 August. A second party, including the Commanding Officer, Squadron Leader E. C. Smart,<sup>29</sup> travelled by air and arrived two days after the first. The rest of the squadron, with the heavy equipment, sailed on 13 August in the SS *Narbada*. Accommodation on the *Narbada* was so inadequate that most of the men were put ashore in **Sydney**, leaving only a small party to



continue the voyage in charge of the machinery. Several small drafts went on in regular Dutch passenger ships in the next few weeks, but the main body of the squadron, due to various causes, was delayed in **Sydney** for seven weeks and did not reach **Singapore** until 27 October.

In Malaya the unit was based at **Tebrau**, in southern Johore. A camp had been built there under the direction of the Air Ministry Department of Works, and by the time the main body arrived it was ready for occupation. The men had expected to face rigorous living conditions in the jungle, and the sight of rows of long, green attap-roofed huts, set in the shade of rubber trees, came as a pleasant surprise. The living quarters were airy and comfortable, and recreation facilities were provided by a **YMCA** hut with canteen, library, writing room, and games equipment. Leave, when available, could be spent in **Singapore**, less than twenty miles away. The only cause for complaint was the food, which consisted of Army field service rations, and compared unfavourably with the peacetime diet still enjoyed by **RAF** stations on **Singapore**.

As soon as the squadron was settled in it began its first job, the construction of a bomber aerodrome. The site, consisting of two runways in the shape of an L, had already been marked out by the survey party, and the construction machinery had been assembled ready to begin work.

The whole area was covered by rubber plantations, miles and miles of trees, planted in orderly rows. The initial process in building the strips was the removal of the trees, which were uprooted by bulldozers and thrust aside to be cut up for firewood by Chinese coolies. Then came the rough levelling of the ground by carry-alls, enormous scoops drawn by 18-ton tractors, which took the tops off the hillocks and deposited the spoil in the hollows; lastly, the graders took over, smoothing out the rough spots and evenly distributing the gravel put down to surface the runways. The mechanical work was supplemented by the labour of hundreds of coolies. They swarmed everywhere with picks and shovels, putting the finishing touches to what the machines had done.



When the squadron started operations the north-east monsoon season had begun. With clock-like regularity the rain started in the afternoons, turning the newly-cleared ground into a quagmire of soft, sticky mud. It did not interfere seriously with the tree-felling by the bulldozers, but the tractors and carry-alls, working on the bare clay, became bogged to their axles. After a heavy afternoon's rain it was impossible to work them until next morning's sun had dried the ground. Then for a few hours, while the sun streamed down and the earth rose in choking clouds of dust, the excavating and grading went on until the rain again put a stop to it. Whenever a spell of fine weather occurred, work went on continuously, far into the night, to make up for lost time, and the peace of the countryside was shattered by the roar of bulldozers and tractors.

Towards the end of November, when the **Tebrau** field was well under way, the survey party, under the command of Flight Lieutenant A. G. Begg, <sup>30</sup> was sent to Bekok, ninety miles to the north, to mark out the site for a second bomber aerodrome.

For news of the outside world the men relied mainly on the camp radio, and the broadcasts showed that the situation was growing daily graver. The road running past the camp, too, gave evidence that something was afoot. Every day it was crowded with military transport: staff cars, guns, truckloads of troops and arms, all hurrying north.

Early on the morning of 8 December **Tebrau** was wakened by the sound of air-raid sirens at **Singapore**, and the men trooped out of their huts into the moonlight to see what was going on. Soon after, they heard the drone of aircraft, and then the guns and searchlights opened up. From the camp they had a grandstand view of the first air raid over **Singapore**. They saw the flashes of the bombs and the tracer from the ground defences reaching up to the planes gleaming 17,000 feet overhead in the beams of the searchlights; but it looked so much like a 'set piece' that nobody realised it was the real thing and not just another practice. It was not until the eight o'clock news came over the radio

that they knew for certain that **Singapore** had been raided.

The loss of airfields in northern **Malaya** in the first few days of the war made it vitally necessary to develop new ones in the south as quickly as possible. The most urgent need was for more fighter strips to accommodate the fighter reinforcements which were on their way. In consequence, the development of **Tebrau** was to be restricted to the completion as soon as possible of a runway of 1200 yards.

In the middle of December work at **Tebrau** was temporarily suspended, and the squadron was split up into several parties and employed on other urgent jobs. A large detachment was sent to the new site at Bekok and ordered to make a fighter strip there; another, of twenty-eight men, was posted to Singapore Island to begin a strip at Sungei Buloh, near the Causeway; smaller parties were stationed at Seletar and Tengah, helping with construction and repair work on the aerodromes; a salvage party was operating in northern **Malaya**; and the rest of the squadron began building another fighter strip on the site of the rifle range at the Johore Military Barracks.

Besides its main task of building aerodromes, the squadron was called on to do a multitude of other odd jobs whenever experience in handling heavy equipment or machinery was needed. The salvage party, formed at the beginning of the war, had been sent to northern **Malaya** to rescue and repair equipment in the battle zone. For the next six weeks, throughout the 500-mile retreat to **Singapore**, it was responsible for saving immense quantities of equipment from under the noses of the Japanese. Operating much of the time only one jump ahead of the British rearguard, it collected abandoned trucks, cars, steam-rollers and graders, put native drivers into them, and sent them rolling down the road to **Singapore**. From bombed-out aerodromes it collected lorry loads of precious radio and other equipment, and sent them also to join the southbound convoys. At the end of the campaign the squadron had more equipment than when it started.

Early in January the detachments at Seletar and Tengah were

recalled to start work again on the **Tebrau** strip. Most of the Bekok party also returned. Having almost completed their job they were ordered to leave it, first dragging trees and other obstacles across the runway in case Japanese aircraft tried to land. A rear party was left behind to lay mines in preparation for later demolition. The survey party went back to **Singapore**, to survey yet another fighter strip at Yio Chu Kang, near Seletar.

The Rifle Range strip was finished, except for final grading and surfacing, by the middle of the month, and was being used by light aircraft of the Malayan Volunteer Air Force. It was the only one built by the squadron in **Malaya** to be used operationally, and was the last to be evacuated when the British forces retired to **Singapore**.

On 15 January, with the Japanese at the northern border of Johore, the Bekok camp was finally evacuated and the runway was blown up next day. Work at **Tebrau** was carried on while the fighting rolled nearer. To the north the mutter of gunfire could be heard, daily growing louder. There were reports of infiltrating parties of Japanese in the area, and every car and truck leaving the camp carried an armed guard. The roads south were thronged with the forerunners of the retreating army: military transport, ambulances, civilian refugees, and plodding natives.

Then came the order to evacuate the camp and prepare the airstrip for demolition. Coolies dug holes in the newly formed runways, and mines were laid in them ready to be exploded when the word was given. An airman bitterly expressed the opinion that in future it would be simpler to build mines into the foundations when the aerodromes were being constructed. The camp was stripped clean of every vestige of equipment, stores and personal gear, and the squadron moved out on the morning of 27 January, the last **Air Force** unit to leave the mainland. The next day a demolition party returned and exploded the mines at **Tebrau** and the Rifle Range. Both strips were left pitted with craters twenty-five to thirty feet across and ten feet deep which, it was hoped, would deny their use to the enemy for a considerable time.

**On Singapore the unit was quartered at the Singapore Dairy Farm, in the centre of the island and about a dozen miles from the city. The men lived in tents hidden among the rubber trees, and the officers in one of the farm buildings. For the next few days, despite frequent interruptions by enemy bombers, work was continued on the two new strips at Sungei Buloh and Yio Chu Kang, both of which were by then almost completed. When, at the beginning of February, the Japanese brought their artillery to bear on them, both had to be abandoned. There was also a constant demand for men and machinery to help in repairing bomb damage on the main aerodromes, which were under daily attack, and parties were sent out from the unit as they were needed. In addition, at the urgent request of the Army authorities, a detachment spent several days building tank traps in the western part of the island.**

**At the end of January it was plain that **Singapore** was no place for an aerodrome construction squadron. The airfields already in existence were being steadily pounded to bits, and any new construction would share the same fate. In any case, there were practically no aircraft left to use them. Once again, as in **Norway, Greece** and **Crete**, it was being proved that aerodromes without adequate fighter protection were valueless. At that stage it was still hoped that **Singapore** could hold out until sufficient forces were assembled in the **Netherlands East Indies** to launch a counter-offensive, and it was decided to send the unit to **Sumatra** to prepare landing fields there.**

## *Evacuation of Singapore*

On the morning of 1 February the squadron was ordered to embark with its machinery on the SS *Talhythius*. The equipment was sent down to the docks, and at one o'clock in the afternoon was all at the ship's side, ready for loading. As a result of the daily bombing of the port, all the native labourers had long since disappeared. No help could be had from the ship's native crew, who were untrained and useless as stevedores. Consequently all the work of loading, including working the winches and stowing the cargo, had to be done by the squadron. The ship's derricks were rigged, winches manned, and loading began at three o'clock.

Work ceased at nightfall, as a strict blackout had to be maintained. It was resumed at daylight next day, and by that evening most of the equipment was on board. There were numerous air-raid alarms during the day; but the work continued without a stop until enemy bombers were practically overhead, when the men took cover, some in shelters on the wharf, others in the ship's hold, to emerge again immediately the raid was over. Several times bombs fell close, but the *Talhythius* was not hit. In sixteen hours of working time, despite interruptions, the men loaded between 2300 and 2500 tons, ship's measurement, of heavy equipment, including tractors, trucks, stores and machinery.

The ship remained at the wharf again that night, and the men returned to their camp at the Dairy Farm. Next morning a working party went down to straighten up the cargo and help to load some additional **RAF** equipment which was to be taken. In the middle of the morning there were two heavy air raids. The *Talhythius* survived the first, although bombs fell close by. In the second she received two direct hits from bombs which exploded in the holds, and there were several more near misses. The working party was caught on board, and one man was killed. Seven more were seriously injured, with severe burns and shock, one of them dying in hospital the next day. The ship was set on fire, and water poured in through holes in her side.

The fires were put out after a 24-hour struggle by the ship's crew, but she continued to make water fast in spite of the rigging of auxiliary pumps. Much of the cargo was destroyed by the bombing and fire, but the heavy excavating machinery and large quantities of medical, dental, and other stores were undamaged and it was hoped that a good deal could be saved. A party of volunteers went to the docks on the afternoon of 4 February and unloaded the medical stores and the men's kitbags, but lack of steam to work the winches prevented any of the heavier gear being taken off. Later the same afternoon another bombing attack set the ship on fire again and sank her.

The next two days were spent at the Dairy Farm waiting for fresh embarkation orders. By this time the Japanese were shelling the island, and the hazard of artillery fire was added to the constant bombing attacks. Shells burst all around the camp as the enemy fired at observation posts on nearby hillocks and searched for Australian batteries hidden in the neighbouring rubber plantations. Overhead, bombers swooped low as they dived to attack big oil installations half a mile away.

On the afternoon of 6 February the squadron was told it would be evacuated in a convoy sailing that evening. The men struck camp immediately and were taken in lorries to the docks. There, amid the litter of bomb wreckage and in the glare of burning buildings, they loaded all that was left of the unit's equipment on to the waiting ships. There was not much: only their personal kitbags, the medical supplies, and their rifles and ammunition.

Two parties were formed, one going on the SS *City of Canterbury* and the other on the SS *Darvel*. Both ships moved out into the stream to join their convoy, but the *Darvel* was ordered back to port by the Naval authorities, partly because she had insufficient crew and partly because she was too slow—her best speed was eleven knots—for the other three much faster ships which were going.

The convoy sailed that night, with a strong naval escort, for **Java**.

The troops on the *City of Canterbury* suffered the discomfort of overcrowding and insufficient food, and there were frequent air-raid alarms; but the escorting warships warded off all enemy attacks, and the ships reached **Batavia** safely on 9 February. The *Darvel*, after lying at anchor in the stream all night, returned to the wharf again on the morning of the 7th. The men landed and were taken to an **RAF** transit camp near Seletar. There they were between the Japanese batteries on the southern tip of Johore and the British on **Singapore**, and the air was full of the roar of shells passing overhead.

The following afternoon they again went down to the docks and embarked on the *Darvel*. After some hours, during which there were several air raids, she eventually put to sea at dusk. She had just cleared the harbour when she was again recalled and brought back to her berth. Bad weather was brewing outside, and visibility had become too bad to risk going through the protective minefields beyond the entrance. That night the *Darvel* lay alongside the wharf and the men slept on her decks.

The next morning they were taken once more to the transit camp. During the night the Japanese had landed on the western part of the island, and by morning they had made considerable progress eastwards. Towards midday their artillery started shelling the camp and all personnel had to take to the shelter trenches. In the afternoon, during a lull in the shelling, the men scrambled into their trucks and once more made for the docks. This time they went straight aboard the *Darvel*, and she immediately headed for the open sea. She escaped just in time to avoid a heavy dive-bombing and strafing attack on shipping in the docks, and the last view of **Singapore** was one of blazing wharf sheds, towering columns of smoke from burning oil tanks, and the sky full of enemy planes and bursting anti-aircraft shells.

The ship sailed through the night, and at daybreak anchored off the southern tip of a small island to avoid observation by enemy aircraft. She was still short-staffed and members of the squadron virtually worked her. Some took shifts in the engine room and stokehold, others mounted



and manned light anti-aircraft guns, and others took over the messing for all the troops on board.

The next stage of the voyage lay through Banka Strait, between Sumatra and Banka Island. Through its narrow waters all shipping from Singapore to Java had to pass, and the Japanese bombers patrolled it constantly during daylight. The ship got under way again at dusk and it was hoped that she would pass through the danger area in the night. But just before entering the Strait she was delayed for two hours assisting another vessel, the SS *Kintak*, which had run ashore during the day. In consequence, she was still in the Strait when the next day dawned. She anchored in the shelter of a group of small islands in the hope that the Japanese would not see her. Close by was another small ship which had been bombed some days before and abandoned.

The morning was peaceful until half past eleven, and then a formation of enemy bombers appeared. They were too high for the ship's anti-aircraft guns, so the gun crews withheld their fire and took cover. The planes altered their course slightly to bring them directly overhead, and then the bombs began to fall. For a minute all was confusion as the bombs rained down all round the ship, the explosions tossing her about like a cork and drenching her with spray. There were no direct hits, but concussion and splinters from near misses made the ship a shambles. Then it was over, and there was silence except for the hiss of steam escaping from burst pipes. Five minutes later the bombers returned, but this time they concentrated their attack on the abandoned steamer a few hundred yards away. They sank her and, having used up all their bombs, returned to their base.

The *Darvel*, although spared a second bombing, was in parlous condition. Her hull was riddled with holes by bomb splinters, and she was leaking badly. The steering gear was damaged, and so were all the lifeboats. Fires had broken out in several places, and many of the troops on board were killed or wounded. The New Zealand unit had one killed, seventeen wounded, and several more slightly injured. \*



The captain gave the order to abandon ship, but the state of the boats made it impossible. The fires were quickly brought under control, and then working parties from the Construction Squadron went below to fill in the scores of small holes with wooden plugs. Others set to work to repair the lifeboats and rigging and clear up the debris on the decks. There was no doctor on board, so medical orderlies cared for the wounded.

A naval officer, Lieutenant Commander Griffiths, RN, took over command of the ship and, rather than wait for another attack, decided to risk steaming through the rest of the strait in daylight. The passage was accomplished safely, and at the southern entrance a halt was made to repair the damaged steering gear. Finally, at half past eight in the evening when welcome darkness covered the ship, course was set for **Batavia**. By next morning, 12 February, the *Darvel* was listing badly to port, and the Captain reported that she was sinking. All passengers and baggage were crowded to the starboard side, and members of the Construction Squadron went below and plugged more holes. After about two hours' work the leakage was brought under control, and the ship eventually arrived off **Batavia** at midday and berthed at two o'clock. Senior officers who had travelled in her reported afterwards that, although the New Zealanders formed only a small proportion of the troops on board, it was due entirely to their work and initiative that the *Darvel* reached **Java** safely.

On arrival at **Batavia** the wounded were taken to the Dutch Military Hospital and the rest of the New Zealanders rejoined the other half of the squadron, which was quartered in a transit camp at King Wilhelm III School. The next day the whole unit was moved to Buitenzorg where it remained for a week while the Commanding Officer, Squadron Leader Smart, discussed future plans with Allied Air Headquarters at **Bandoeng**. In the prevailing confusion it was difficult to obtain any instructions. While it was still thought that **Java** could be defended, suggestions were made that the squadron should be employed digging trenches and tank traps in **Java**, but with the Japanese advance daily coming closer, the

situation was constantly changing and plans were made only to be discarded. Eventually it was decided that as the unit had lost all its equipment it should be evacuated, to reform and re-equip in **Australia** or **New Zealand**. Accordingly, on 20 February it returned to **Batavia** and went on board the SS *Marella*. Although Japanese air activity was by this time increasing over **Java**, the embarkation was carried out without incident. The *Marella* sailed at six o'clock that evening, in one of the last convoys to get away from **Java** unharmed, and reached the friendly shores of **Australia** a week later.

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\* Flight Lieutenant F. Butler commanded the party on the *Darvel* until he was wounded in the attack on 11 February, when he handed over command to Flight Lieutenant Begg.

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# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## NO. 1 AERODROME CONSTRUCTION SQUADRON

## **No. 1 Aerodrome Construction Squadron**

**No. 1 Aerodrome Construction Squadron**, the first unit of its kind in the Air Forces of the British Empire, was formed in New Zealand in July 1941. It was sent to **Malaya** to help in the building of airstrips which were urgently needed as part of the defence system of **Singapore**.

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The men were recruited from all over New Zealand. They came from the Public Works Department, from private construction companies, and from the ranks of those already enlisted in the **Air Force**. Unlike the usual run of recruits who joined the **Air Force** in their early twenties, these were men of up to forty-five years of age, specially selected for their skill in the various trades and for their physical toughness and ability to do heavy work in tropical conditions. After assembling at **Rongotai** they were issued with tropical kit, and then, while waiting for shipping to take them overseas, were given an intensive course in drill, rifle and machine-gun training, and lectures on discipline, hygiene, etc. At the same time, most of the construction machinery in the country was gathered in **Wellington**, to be sent with the unit when it sailed.

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The whole area was covered by rubber plantations, miles and miles of trees, planted in orderly rows. The initial process in building the strips was the removal of the trees, which were uprooted by bulldozers and thrust aside to be cut up for firewood by Chinese coolies. Then came the rough levelling of the ground by carry-alls, enormous scoops drawn by 18-ton tractors, which took the tops off the hillocks and deposited the spoil in the hollows; lastly, the graders took over, smoothing out the rough spots and evenly distributing the gravel put down to surface the runways. The mechanical work was supplemented by the labour of hundreds of coolies. They swarmed everywhere with picks and shovels, putting the finishing touches to what the machines had done.

When the squadron started operations the north-east monsoon season had begun. With clock-like regularity the rain started in the afternoons, turning the newly-cleared ground into a quagmire of soft, sticky mud. It did not interfere seriously with the tree-felling by the bulldozers, but the tractors and carry-alls, working on the bare clay, became bogged to their axles. After a heavy afternoon's rain it was impossible to work them until next morning's sun had dried the ground. Then for a few hours, while the sun streamed down and the earth rose in choking clouds of dust, the excavating and grading went on until the rain again put a stop to it. Whenever a spell of fine weather occurred, work went on continuously, far into the night, to make up for lost time, and the peace of the countryside was shattered by the roar of bulldozers and tractors.

Towards the end of November, when the **Tebrau** field was well under way, the survey party, under the command of Flight Lieutenant A. G. Begg, <sup>30</sup> was sent to Bekok, ninety miles to the north, to mark out the site for a second bomber aerodrome.

For news of the outside world the men relied mainly on the camp radio, and the broadcasts showed that the situation was growing daily graver. The road running past the camp, too, gave evidence that something was afoot. Every day it was crowded with military transport: staff cars, guns, truckloads of troops and arms, all hurrying north.

Early on the morning of 8 December **Tebrau** was wakened by the sound of air-raid sirens at **Singapore**, and the men trooped out of their huts into the moonlight to see what was going on. Soon after, they heard the drone of aircraft, and then the guns and searchlights opened up. From the camp they had a grandstand view of the first air raid over **Singapore**. They saw the flashes of the bombs and the tracer from the ground defences reaching up to the planes gleaming 17,000 feet overhead in the beams of the searchlights; but it looked so much like a 'set piece' that nobody realised it was the real thing and not just another practice. It was not until the eight o'clock news came over the radio

that they knew for certain that **Singapore** had been raided.

The loss of airfields in northern **Malaya** in the first few days of the war made it vitally necessary to develop new ones in the south as quickly as possible. The most urgent need was for more fighter strips to accommodate the fighter reinforcements which were on their way. In consequence, the development of **Tebrau** was to be restricted to the completion as soon as possible of a runway of 1200 yards.

In the middle of December work at **Tebrau** was temporarily suspended, and the squadron was split up into several parties and employed on other urgent jobs. A large detachment was sent to the new site at Bekok and ordered to make a fighter strip there; another, of twenty-eight men, was posted to Singapore Island to begin a strip at Sungei Buloh, near the Causeway; smaller parties were stationed at Seletar and Tengah, helping with construction and repair work on the aerodromes; a salvage party was operating in northern **Malaya**; and the rest of the squadron began building another fighter strip on the site of the rifle range at the Johore Military Barracks.

Besides its main task of building aerodromes, the squadron was called on to do a multitude of other odd jobs whenever experience in handling heavy equipment or machinery was needed. The salvage party, formed at the beginning of the war, had been sent to northern **Malaya** to rescue and repair equipment in the battle zone. For the next six weeks, throughout the 500-mile retreat to **Singapore**, it was responsible for saving immense quantities of equipment from under the noses of the Japanese. Operating much of the time only one jump ahead of the British rearguard, it collected abandoned trucks, cars, steam-rollers and graders, put native drivers into them, and sent them rolling down the road to **Singapore**. From bombed-out aerodromes it collected lorry loads of precious radio and other equipment, and sent them also to join the southbound convoys. At the end of the campaign the squadron had more equipment than when it started.

Early in January the detachments at Seletar and Tengah were

recalled to start work again on the **Tebrau** strip. Most of the Bekok party also returned. Having almost completed their job they were ordered to leave it, first dragging trees and other obstacles across the runway in case Japanese aircraft tried to land. A rear party was left behind to lay mines in preparation for later demolition. The survey party went back to **Singapore**, to survey yet another fighter strip at Yio Chu Kang, near Seletar.

The Rifle Range strip was finished, except for final grading and surfacing, by the middle of the month, and was being used by light aircraft of the Malayan Volunteer Air Force. It was the only one built by the squadron in **Malaya** to be used operationally, and was the last to be evacuated when the British forces retired to **Singapore**.

On 15 January, with the Japanese at the northern border of Johore, the Bekok camp was finally evacuated and the runway was blown up next day. Work at **Tebrau** was carried on while the fighting rolled nearer. To the north the mutter of gunfire could be heard, daily growing louder. There were reports of infiltrating parties of Japanese in the area, and every car and truck leaving the camp carried an armed guard. The roads south were thronged with the forerunners of the retreating army: military transport, ambulances, civilian refugees, and plodding natives.

Then came the order to evacuate the camp and prepare the airstrip for demolition. Coolies dug holes in the newly formed runways, and mines were laid in them ready to be exploded when the word was given. An airman bitterly expressed the opinion that in future it would be simpler to build mines into the foundations when the aerodromes were being constructed. The camp was stripped clean of every vestige of equipment, stores and personal gear, and the squadron moved out on the morning of 27 January, the last **Air Force** unit to leave the mainland. The next day a demolition party returned and exploded the mines at **Tebrau** and the Rifle Range. Both strips were left pitted with craters twenty-five to thirty feet across and ten feet deep which, it was hoped, would deny their use to the enemy for a considerable time.



**On Singapore the unit was quartered at the Singapore Dairy Farm, in the centre of the island and about a dozen miles from the city. The men lived in tents hidden among the rubber trees, and the officers in one of the farm buildings. For the next few days, despite frequent interruptions by enemy bombers, work was continued on the two new strips at Sungei Buloh and Yio Chu Kang, both of which were by then almost completed. When, at the beginning of February, the Japanese brought their artillery to bear on them, both had to be abandoned. There was also a constant demand for men and machinery to help in repairing bomb damage on the main aerodromes, which were under daily attack, and parties were sent out from the unit as they were needed. In addition, at the urgent request of the Army authorities, a detachment spent several days building tank traps in the western part of the island.**

**At the end of January it was plain that [Singapore](#) was no place for an aerodrome construction squadron. The airfields already in existence were being steadily pounded to bits, and any new construction would share the same fate. In any case, there were practically no aircraft left to use them. Once again, as in [Norway](#), [Greece](#) and [Crete](#), it was being proved that aerodromes without adequate fighter protection were valueless. At that stage it was still hoped that [Singapore](#) could hold out until sufficient forces were assembled in the [Netherlands East Indies](#) to launch a counter-offensive, and it was decided to send the unit to [Sumatra](#) to prepare landing fields there.**

# **EPIISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2**

## **EVACUATION OF SINGAPORE**

## *Evacuation of Singapore*

On the morning of 1 February the squadron was ordered to embark with its machinery on the SS *Talhythius*. The equipment was sent down to the docks, and at one o'clock in the afternoon was all at the ship's side, ready for loading. As a result of the daily bombing of the port, all the native labourers had long since disappeared. No help could be had from the ship's native crew, who were untrained and useless as stevedores. Consequently all the work of loading, including working the winches and stowing the cargo, had to be done by the squadron. The ship's derricks were rigged, winches manned, and loading began at three o'clock.

Work ceased at nightfall, as a strict blackout had to be maintained. It was resumed at daylight next day, and by that evening most of the equipment was on board. There were numerous air-raid alarms during the day; but the work continued without a stop until enemy bombers were practically overhead, when the men took cover, some in shelters on the wharf, others in the ship's hold, to emerge again immediately the raid was over. Several times bombs fell close, but the *Talhythius* was not hit. In sixteen hours of working time, despite interruptions, the men loaded between 2300 and 2500 tons, ship's measurement, of heavy equipment, including tractors, trucks, stores and machinery.

The ship remained at the wharf again that night, and the men returned to their camp at the Dairy Farm. Next morning a working party went down to straighten up the cargo and help to load some additional **RAF** equipment which was to be taken. In the middle of the morning there were two heavy air raids. The *Talhythius* survived the first, although bombs fell close by. In the second she received two direct hits from bombs which exploded in the holds, and there were several more near misses. The working party was caught on board, and one man was killed. Seven more were seriously injured, with severe burns and shock, one of them dying in hospital the next day. The ship was set on fire, and water poured in through holes in her side.

The fires were put out after a 24-hour struggle by the ship's crew, but she continued to make water fast in spite of the rigging of auxiliary pumps. Much of the cargo was destroyed by the bombing and fire, but the heavy excavating machinery and large quantities of medical, dental, and other stores were undamaged and it was hoped that a good deal could be saved. A party of volunteers went to the docks on the afternoon of 4 February and unloaded the medical stores and the men's kitbags, but lack of steam to work the winches prevented any of the heavier gear being taken off. Later the same afternoon another bombing attack set the ship on fire again and sank her.

The next two days were spent at the Dairy Farm waiting for fresh embarkation orders. By this time the Japanese were shelling the island, and the hazard of artillery fire was added to the constant bombing attacks. Shells burst all around the camp as the enemy fired at observation posts on nearby hillocks and searched for Australian batteries hidden in the neighbouring rubber plantations. Overhead, bombers swooped low as they dived to attack big oil installations half a mile away.

On the afternoon of 6 February the squadron was told it would be evacuated in a convoy sailing that evening. The men struck camp immediately and were taken in lorries to the docks. There, amid the litter of bomb wreckage and in the glare of burning buildings, they loaded all that was left of the unit's equipment on to the waiting ships. There was not much: only their personal kitbags, the medical supplies, and their rifles and ammunition.

Two parties were formed, one going on the SS *City of Canterbury* and the other on the SS *Darvel*. Both ships moved out into the stream to join their convoy, but the *Darvel* was ordered back to port by the Naval authorities, partly because she had insufficient crew and partly because she was too slow—her best speed was eleven knots—for the other three much faster ships which were going.

The convoy sailed that night, with a strong naval escort, for **Java**.

The troops on the *City of Canterbury* suffered the discomfort of overcrowding and insufficient food, and there were frequent air-raid alarms; but the escorting warships warded off all enemy attacks, and the ships reached **Batavia** safely on 9 February. The *Darvel*, after lying at anchor in the stream all night, returned to the wharf again on the morning of the 7th. The men landed and were taken to an **RAF** transit camp near Seletar. There they were between the Japanese batteries on the southern tip of Johore and the British on **Singapore**, and the air was full of the roar of shells passing overhead.

The following afternoon they again went down to the docks and embarked on the *Darvel*. After some hours, during which there were several air raids, she eventually put to sea at dusk. She had just cleared the harbour when she was again recalled and brought back to her berth. Bad weather was brewing outside, and visibility had become too bad to risk going through the protective minefields beyond the entrance. That night the *Darvel* lay alongside the wharf and the men slept on her decks.

The next morning they were taken once more to the transit camp. During the night the Japanese had landed on the western part of the island, and by morning they had made considerable progress eastwards. Towards midday their artillery started shelling the camp and all personnel had to take to the shelter trenches. In the afternoon, during a lull in the shelling, the men scrambled into their trucks and once more made for the docks. This time they went straight aboard the *Darvel*, and she immediately headed for the open sea. She escaped just in time to avoid a heavy dive-bombing and strafing attack on shipping in the docks, and the last view of **Singapore** was one of blazing wharf sheds, towering columns of smoke from burning oil tanks, and the sky full of enemy planes and bursting anti-aircraft shells.

The ship sailed through the night, and at daybreak anchored off the southern tip of a small island to avoid observation by enemy aircraft. She was still short-staffed and members of the squadron virtually worked her. Some took shifts in the engine room and stokehold, others mounted

and manned light anti-aircraft guns, and others took over the messing for all the troops on board.

The next stage of the voyage lay through Banka Strait, between Sumatra and Banka Island. Through its narrow waters all shipping from Singapore to Java had to pass, and the Japanese bombers patrolled it constantly during daylight. The ship got under way again at dusk and it was hoped that she would pass through the danger area in the night. But just before entering the Strait she was delayed for two hours assisting another vessel, the SS *Kintak*, which had run ashore during the day. In consequence, she was still in the Strait when the next day dawned. She anchored in the shelter of a group of small islands in the hope that the Japanese would not see her. Close by was another small ship which had been bombed some days before and abandoned.

The morning was peaceful until half past eleven, and then a formation of enemy bombers appeared. They were too high for the ship's anti-aircraft guns, so the gun crews withheld their fire and took cover. The planes altered their course slightly to bring them directly overhead, and then the bombs began to fall. For a minute all was confusion as the bombs rained down all round the ship, the explosions tossing her about like a cork and drenching her with spray. There were no direct hits, but concussion and splinters from near misses made the ship a shambles. Then it was over, and there was silence except for the hiss of steam escaping from burst pipes. Five minutes later the bombers returned, but this time they concentrated their attack on the abandoned steamer a few hundred yards away. They sank her and, having used up all their bombs, returned to their base.

The *Darvel*, although spared a second bombing, was in parlous condition. Her hull was riddled with holes by bomb splinters, and she was leaking badly. The steering gear was damaged, and so were all the lifeboats. Fires had broken out in several places, and many of the troops on board were killed or wounded. The New Zealand unit had one killed, seventeen wounded, and several more slightly injured. \*

The captain gave the order to abandon ship, but the state of the boats made it impossible. The fires were quickly brought under control, and then working parties from the Construction Squadron went below to fill in the scores of small holes with wooden plugs. Others set to work to repair the lifeboats and rigging and clear up the debris on the decks. There was no doctor on board, so medical orderlies cared for the wounded.

A naval officer, Lieutenant Commander Griffiths, RN, took over command of the ship and, rather than wait for another attack, decided to risk steaming through the rest of the strait in daylight. The passage was accomplished safely, and at the southern entrance a halt was made to repair the damaged steering gear. Finally, at half past eight in the evening when welcome darkness covered the ship, course was set for **Batavia**. By next morning, 12 February, the *Darvel* was listing badly to port, and the Captain reported that she was sinking. All passengers and baggage were crowded to the starboard side, and members of the Construction Squadron went below and plugged more holes. After about two hours' work the leakage was brought under control, and the ship eventually arrived off **Batavia** at midday and berthed at two o'clock. Senior officers who had travelled in her reported afterwards that, although the New Zealanders formed only a small proportion of the troops on board, it was due entirely to their work and initiative that the *Darvel* reached **Java** safely.

On arrival at **Batavia** the wounded were taken to the Dutch Military Hospital and the rest of the New Zealanders rejoined the other half of the squadron, which was quartered in a transit camp at King Wilhelm III School. The next day the whole unit was moved to Buitenzorg where it remained for a week while the Commanding Officer, Squadron Leader Smart, discussed future plans with Allied Air Headquarters at **Bandoeng**. In the prevailing confusion it was difficult to obtain any instructions. While it was still thought that **Java** could be defended, suggestions were made that the squadron should be employed digging trenches and tank traps in **Java**, but with the Japanese advance daily coming closer, the

situation was constantly changing and plans were made only to be discarded. Eventually it was decided that as the unit had lost all its equipment it should be evacuated, to reform and re-equip in **Australia** or New Zealand. Accordingly, on 20 February it returned to **Batavia** and went on board the SS *Marella*. Although Japanese air activity was by this time increasing over **Java**, the embarkation was carried out without incident. The *Marella* sailed at six o'clock that evening, in one of the last convoys to get away from **Java** unharmed, and reached the friendly shores of **Australia** a week later.



# **EPIISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2**

## **OPERATIONS OVER BURMA**

# *Operations Over Burma*

## **No. 67 Fighter Squadron**

Meanwhile in **Burma**, which the Japanese had attacked through **Thailand** at the narrowest part of the Kra Isthmus, the New Zealanders of No. 67 Fighter Squadron (the only **RAF** squadron in the country), were pitting their Buffaloes against the Japanese at odds of one to eight. It was of paramount importance that the great port of **Rangoon**—vital as the sea terminus for the **Burma** Road and supply link to **China**—should be preserved as far as possible from damaging air attacks. The first raid on **Rangoon** was made by the Japanese on 23 December with a force of some sixty bombers and fighters.

At Mingaladon aerodrome on the outskirts of the city, No. 67 Squadron received adequate warning of the enemy's approach and took off to intercept, in company with a squadron of the American Volunteer Group which had arrived from Loiwing, in **China**, three days before. Sergeant C. V. Bargh <sup>31</sup> and Sergeant G. A. Williams <sup>32</sup> were in R/T \* communication with the ground control when the raiders were sighted. Instead of the time-honoured 'Tally-ho', there came over the radio link the excited voice of Sergeant Bargh: 'Hell! Showers of 'em, look Willie! Showers of 'em!'

For a first combat the results were impressive. In a moment Bargh was in amongst the Japanese fixed-undercarriage 96 and 97 type fighters, and immediately became involved in a confused series of most hazardous dogfights. It had been drilled into the pilots that their primary object was to shoot down the bombers, and Bargh, by his single-handed manoeuvres, succeeded in drawing the Japanese fighter escort away from the formation.

As in **Malaya**, a New Zealander drew first blood. Sergeant Williams saw his opportunity and calmly proceeded to carry out 'copy-book' attacks on the enemy bombers, shooting down one and getting bursts of machine-gun fire into the petrol tanks of some six more. As the Japanese tanks were not self-sealing, it is probable that some of these aircraft failed to return to base.

**In the meantime, with his aircraft shot full of holes, Bargh dived away from the enemy fighters, flew out to sea, and regained height to await the return of the bombers. His windscreen had oiled up but, nothing daunted, he took off one of his flying boots, wiped the perspex clean with his sock, and turned in to attack the bombers as they came away from the target. Joined now by Sergeant E. H. Beable <sup>33</sup> at 17,000 feet, he dived on the enemy formation and succeeded in destroying one bomber and probably a fighter. Beable fired a long burst into a bomber which, last seen trailing smoke, he claimed as a 'probable'.**

**Sergeant W. Christiansen, <sup>34</sup> though slightly later in sighting the enemy, attacked at the first opportunity. His own words describe the combat:**

**'I climbed to 16,000 feet and did a front-quarter attack, opening fire at 400 yards and breaking away at approximately 100 yards. I broke away to the front of the formation and repeated this attack. My windscreen was covered with oil, making it impossible for me to observe the results of my attacks. I did three more front-quarter attacks and then broke away as I couldn't see out of my front windscreen. I was firing at 12,000 feet when I saw another formation 1000 feet below me. I dived and did a climbing stern attack by pointing my aircraft at the formation and firing. I could not aim or see any results as by then visibility through my windscreen was nil. The formation headed out to sea in a north-easterly direction and I returned to base to refuel.'**

**The remainder of the squadron and the American Volunteer Group had a very satisfactory total score for the day of thirteen enemy aircraft destroyed and several probables. Of these, No. 67 Squadron was able to claim six destroyed and three probables without loss to themselves — a highly creditable performance in their first encounter. Nevertheless, many of the bombers had succeeded in getting through to the target and both **Mingaladon** and **Rangoon** were heavily attacked. At Mingaladon one of the first bombs demolished the operations room, two airmen being killed and two Buffaloes destroyed on the ground. For all that the**

squadron was well pleased with the day's work and morale was high. All hands set to work to build another operations room, and by the evening of the following day this was completed. The aircraft were again brought to maximum serviceability and the pilots waited at 'readiness' for the next attack, living on somewhat scratch meals owing to the disappearance of all the native mess staff.

They did not have long to wait. About eleven o'clock on Christmas morning the warning system reported 120 enemy aircraft heading for **Rangoon**, from the direction of **Mergui** on the Tenasserim coast. Twenty-four Buffaloes and Tomahawks scrambled immediately.

This time, apparently somewhat shaken by their previous reception, the Japanese paid our pilots the pretty (if back-handed) compliment of despatching some eighty fighters with their raiding force, including a number of **Navy** 'O' or Zero type, which had not previously operated in this locality. Heavily outnumbered, the defenders met them on the way in, but the fighter opposition was so intense that only Williams and one other pilot got through to the bombers. They speedily shot down one, of which each claimed a half share. Williams then attacked a fighter, raked it from end to end, and saw it go down out of control. He was then 'jumped' from behind so was unable to see it hit the ground.

Pilot Officer G. S. Sharp <sup>35</sup> and Sergeant E. E. Pedersen, <sup>36</sup> meeting a fierce attack by an almost overwhelming number of Japanese fighters with height advantage, fought their way through after shooting up three of them. Sharp forced-landed on **Mingaladon** with some controls and electric cables cut and a bullet hole in the ammunition tank.

Meanwhile, Beable was making the most of the opportunities that came his way, and in three separate attacks he blew up a Zero that was on his leader's tail and claimed a 'possible' and a 'damaged'. From each of these combats he had to dive away to evade enemy fighters, but returned to the fray until his guns would no longer fire. Sergeant J. G. Finn, <sup>37</sup> who was with him at first, was attacked before he could reach the bombers, but in turning he was able to fire a good burst into the

wing root of an enemy fighter; a bright flame leapt from its petrol tank.

The indefatigable Bargh was caught on the climb, but got a burst into a fighter which immediately began to trail smoke. He then had to dive to ground level before shaking off a Zero which had got on his tail. By the time he had climbed back into the fray the enemy had disappeared and he had to be content with one probable. Sergeant K. A. Rutherford <sup>38</sup> raked a bomber but was 'jumped' by three Zeros and had to dive away without a claim.

The Tomahawks of the American Volunteer Group had a field day and claimed twenty-one destroyed, giving a total from all sources of twenty-seven destroyed, two probables, and two damaged. Thus in the course of two raids the Japanese lost over forty aircraft out of some 180, against which there had been never more than twenty-five British and American fighters. No. 67 Squadron lost Sergeants J. MacPherson, <sup>39</sup> E. B. Hewitt, <sup>40</sup> and R. P. McNabb <sup>41</sup> ( **RNZAF**) and Flying Officer J. Lambert ( **RAF**) killed.

The Japanese did not appear inclined to face a repetition of such fighting and **Rangoon** remained virtually free from attack until 23 January 1942. Thus, in the opening stages of the air war in **Burma**, a creditable victory was achieved by the Allied fighter force which ensured the safe disembarkation of reinforcements, including the 7th Armoured Brigade, at **Rangoon**.

Back on the ground at **Mingaladon** on Christmas morning conditions were far from normal. The airfield and surroundings had been thoroughly pattern-bombed and all native labour had disappeared. Cooks and kitchens had vanished and, instead of sitting down to Christmas dinner, all hands were employed filling bomb craters on the airfield and repairing damaged aircraft against the possibility of another raid next day. That night the pilots had their Christmas supper—bully beef and beer. The Supreme Commander, General Sir Archibald Wavell, and the Governor of **Burma**, Sir Reginald Dorman-Smith, visited the station and warmly congratulated all ranks, not only on their splendid defeat of the

enemy but on their efforts in repairing the damage and having the squadron again at maximum readiness.

The Buffaloes were dispersed around the airfield and meals were brought round by truck, and although the pilots waiting for the next attack knew only too well the odds against them—and only those who have waited for the enemy in such circumstances can appreciate the sense of strain—there was never any indication of jumpiness. Before dawn the flight truck would roll up to the dispersal hut and yawning pilots would jump out to disentangle their flying gear from the heap on the bench. Outside, in the keen air of the early dawn, the silence would be split by the sudden crackle of Cyclone engines bursting into life, blue flames licking back from the motors as they were run up.

Rutherford, a sheep farmer from **Canterbury** and wise in the ways of bushcraft, could usually be found building a fire—at a safe distance between the aircraft and the hut—to brew the inevitable tea. Christiansen and Cutfield <sup>42</sup> developed the routine of a morning session of ‘Acey Deuce’, a game very popular with the pilots of the American Volunteer Group. Other pilots, deciding that an opportunity to sleep was not to be lightly tossed aside, would stretch themselves comfortably on a pile of parachutes and flying gear, while some would make the most of a chance to repair equipment. Before long the mess truck would arrive with supplies of eggs and bacon, soon to be sizzling in the frying pan. Then a rattle of cutlery and laughter as they gathered round to breakfast from huge sandwiches composed of a fried egg on a slice of bacon held between two planks of bread. The carefree manner, cheery banter, and spirit of comradeship among all ranks gave their life something denied to those whose lot is cast in a more peaceful mould.

Because of the importance of defending **Rangoon**, the Air Officer Commanding (Air Vice- Marshal D. F. Stevenson) could not spare any aircraft from the tiny force at his disposal to take the war to the enemy, and until reinforcements of Hurricanes and Blenheims began to arrive in January he could give very little support to the Army. No. 67 Squadron carried out an occasional photographic reconnaissance to obtain

information on Japanese air concentrations in **Thailand**, and as a result of one such flight the Buffaloes were sent on a strafing attack on Mesoht aerodrome. The attack was a complete surprise. The aerodrome buildings were thoroughly strafed, an aircraft at the west end of the runway shot up, and a large fire started. Rutherford concentrated on the hangars and received several hits from light anti-aircraft fire. Sergeant E. L. Sadler <sup>43</sup> claimed a 'flamer' on the ground, the enemy aircraft firing back at him from its stationary position as he flashed over it. The whole operation was over in a few minutes and the Buffaloes returned without loss.

While on patrol down the Tenasserim over **Tavoy**, Pilot Officer P. M. Brewer <sup>44</sup> crept up on a single-engined two-seater aircraft. His first burst must have killed the observer as there was no return fire; no evasive action was taken by the enemy aircraft, which caught fire and crashed into the hills.

Towards the end of January the long looked-for and sorely-needed air reinforcements began to arrive. The fighter strength was augmented by thirty-six Hurricanes which were distributed amongst Nos. 17, 135, and 136 Squadrons; pilots for these squadrons, including several New Zealanders, had already arrived from England and the **Middle East**. Reinforced by these three fighter squadrons and by No. 113 Bomber Squadron equipped with Mark II Blenheims, the Air Officer Commanding was able to attack occupied airfields in **Thailand** and so reduce the scale of air attack on **Rangoon**. To achieve this he commenced a 'leaning forward' evolution with a portion of the fighter force, and from advanced bases at **Moulmein**, **Tavoy**, and **Mergui** resolutely attacked enemy aircraft wherever found. This policy brought encouraging results, fifty-eight enemy bombers and fighters being destroyed and many more damaged.



## ***No. 113 Bomber Squadron***

**No. 113 Squadron also inflicted much damage on the enemy at this time. Six New Zealanders flew with the squadron—Squadron Leader P. Duggan-Smith <sup>45</sup> and Flight Sergeant J. Keys <sup>46</sup> (pilots) and Sergeants A. M. Dingle, <sup>47</sup> J. Beard, <sup>48</sup> E. Brooking, <sup>49</sup> and J. B. J. McKenzie <sup>50</sup> (navigators). On 7 January, the night of its arrival at **Mingaladon** from the **Middle East**, the squadron despatched ten Blenheims to carry out a raid on **Bangkok** in which 11,000 lb. of bombs were dropped on the dock area. This operation, undertaken so soon after arrival, was most creditable, particularly on the part of the navigators. Next day, because facilities at **Mingaladon** were poor, the Blenheims flew out to **Lashio**, near the Chinese border, to be serviced. They returned on 18 January and began operations at high pressure, both in support of the retreating army and in long-range bombing of enemy airfields and bases. Mesoht aerodrome was again attacked by shallow dive-bombing from 2700 feet, the runways being pitted and several fires started. In succeeding days the squadron's activities included strikes on the **Thailand** airfields at Tak and Messareing, whilst a transport convoy was attacked near Kawareik.**

**On 24 January another night raid was made on **Bangkok**, all serviceable aircraft participating. The Blenheims attacked singly at ten-minute intervals, bombing from 2000 feet with a war load of four 250 lb. bombs and four 25 lb. incendiaries. Large explosions and several fires resulted. An intense anti-aircraft barrage was again encountered over the target area, and two aircraft, including one navigated by Sergeant Dingle, failed to return. The Japanese retaliated with persistent bombing of **Mingaladon**, and No. 113 Squadron was withdrawn north to Taungoo in the Sittang Valley. A detached flight remained in the **Rangoon** area, being dispersed at Zayat Kwin and Johnny Walker satellite strips.**

**Operations now included attacks on enemy river traffic near Kado, north of **Moulmein**, as well as further raids on **Bangkok**. During the third week after its arrival No. 113 Squadron made 102 sorties and dropped**

**89,992 lb. of bombs on the enemy. Although, like the fighters, there were too few bombers to affect the final outcome materially, there can be no doubt that these operations did much to check the Japanese advance at a vital period.**

**Throughout February the squadron carried out a variety of attacks and hit the enemy wherever he could be found. River steamers, railways, barracks, troop concentrations and stores dumps all received attention, until on 18 February, after a month of continual flying, the land threat to Zayat Kwin made this airfield untenable and the detached flight was withdrawn to Magwe. The squadron continued to operate from Magwe until 7 March, when the fall of **Rangoon** and the advance of the enemy made it necessary to withdraw to **India**. From its new base the squadron continued to support the retreating army.**

## *Fighter Operations*

In the meantime, the fighters had been in action without respite. On 23 January the Japanese attempted a surprise strafing attack on **Mingaladon** with twenty-three Army 96 type fighters. Fortunately the warning system gave notice of their approach and the Buffaloes and Tomahawks were waiting for them. Christiansen shot down one plane and Pilot Officer A. A. Cooper <sup>51</sup> damaged another. The next day the Japanese came again, evidently intent upon annihilating the Allied air force at **Mingaladon**.

Cooper, Sadler, Bargh, and Christiansen were patrolling above base at 18,000 feet, and this time had the height advantage, when an enemy formation of Army 97 bombers was sighted ten miles east-south-east of the base. All the enemy were shot down in the ensuing action. Sadler made two attacks on a bomber, which immediately dropped out of the formation and crashed in flames. His next attack also set fire to a bomber, which was claimed by two other pilots who finished it off. Cooper got a long burst into a bomber which blew up, but he received return fire in his own engine and it began to emit smoke and flames. He dived steeply with switches off and blew the fire out. Bargh followed up earlier successes by getting a 'flamer' after an attack pressed home to 100 yards. He saw all the other bombers in the formation going down, some in flames and some disintegrating with wings falling off. The last one he followed down had evidently received attacks from other fighters, as it blew up when he was about to attack it and crashed beside the railway line north-east of Pegu.

On the ground, however, the situation was rapidly deteriorating. The retreating British Army sustained a severe reverse at the Sittang Bridge, and the way was open to **Rangoon**. The **Air Force** was forced back to Magwe, where the warning system—so vital to aerial defence—was totally inadequate to cope with the possibility of surprise strafing and bombing attacks. As more airfields fell into the enemy's hands so the weight of his attacks increased, and the situation of the defending

**fighters became ever more precarious.**

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**No. 67 Squadron was now reduced to six Buffaloes, while the newly arrived Hurricane squadrons had also suffered severe losses. Living conditions were becoming more and more primitive and regular food was hard to obtain. Some of the New Zealand pilots lived in a deserted building on a peanut farm, where they contrived meals of half-cooked tinned sausages and water melons, washed down with cocoa made with goat's milk and water from the Irrawaddy River. Fortunately, some food parcels from home were rescued from **Rangoon**, and for a short time they were sustained by feasts of fruit cake.**

****Rangoon** fell on 7 March and the Japanese air attacks became heavier. In an effort to upset the enemy as much as possible every available aircraft, including the Blenheims of No. 113 and No. 45 Squadrons, was despatched to attack the airfield at **Mingaladon**. This strike was carried out with great determination and over twenty-seven Japanese aircraft were destroyed on the ground and in the air without loss. The enemy at once made reprisal raids against Magwe before the aircraft had been serviced on their return. Only four Hurricanes and six Tomahawks could be scrambled to intercept twenty-one bombers and ten fighters, but four of the enemy were shot down. Further raids at half-hour intervals succeeded in swamping the defences and inflicting considerable damage to the runways.**

**It was the beginning of the end.**

On the following day there was no let-up, and raids continued with two waves of twenty-seven bombers and ten fighters each. The early-warning system no longer functioned and the Allied fighter force was all but overwhelmed. By midday the runways at Magwe were useless and many of the remaining aircraft had been destroyed on the ground. That afternoon the four remaining Tomahawks of the American Volunteer Group were flown out to Loiwing in **China**.

Next day the enemy again thoroughly pattern-bombed the runways at Magwe, and although two of the three remaining Hurricanes intercepted the raiders, no enemy aircraft were shot down. Our aircraft managed to get back on their aerodrome only by a miracle of airmanship. That night the bomb craters were filled in sufficiently to allow such aircraft as could be made airworthy to take off for Loiwing. The ground crews travelled overland in a motley collection of motor transport in which they ran the gauntlet of Japanese army units from **Thailand**. A few other aircraft were patched up and flown out to **Akyab** on the coast, and thence to Dum Dum in **India**. The air battle for **Rangoon** had ended.

Much has been written of the achievements of Fighter Command in the Battle of **Britain**. In faraway **Burma**, in tropical heat and rain, a few **RAF** and American squadrons fought to a finish against overwhelming odds. According to such records as are available, 233 enemy fighters and bombers were claimed to have been destroyed in the air during this campaign, 179 by the P40 Tomahawks of the American Volunteer Group and fifty-four by the **Royal Air Force**. Although accurate assessment is difficult in such country, fifty-eight enemy aircraft were also claimed as destroyed on the ground and seventy-six as probably destroyed; a further 116 enemy aircraft were damaged. Allied losses were twenty-two Buffaloes and Hurricanes, sixteen Tomahawks and eight Blenheims in aerial combat, and fifty-one aircraft of all types destroyed on the ground.

Throughout the first phase of the campaign the lack of an adequate early-warning system had been a source of constant anxiety. There was

only one radar set in **Burma** at this time, for which there were no spare parts. By constant servicing it had been maintained in operation with the aid of locally manufactured parts and, together with natives of the Burma Observer Corps who operated from various lookout posts linked to the civil telephone system, had played a most important part in staving off surprise strafing attacks and in enabling our fighters to become air-borne in time to intercept raiding bomber forces.

On the ground the Japanese had swept all before them and in three months had conquered **Burma**. In the air, however, they had suffered one defeat after another until at last, because of their ability to keep on reinforcing their air force, they overwhelmed the dwindling squadrons opposing them. The Royal Air Force, with its Commonwealth representation, retired to **India**, licked its wounds and prepared for the recoil. By its devotion and self-sacrifice it had delayed the Japanese advance at a critical period, thus assisting in the extrication of General Alexander's hard-pressed army, which crossed into **Assam** just as the monsoonal rains came down and provided a natural barrier between captured **Burma** and **India**.

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\* Radio telephone

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# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## NO. 67 FIGHTER SQUADRON

## **No. 67 Fighter Squadron**

Meanwhile in **Burma**, which the Japanese had attacked through **Thailand** at the narrowest part of the Kra Isthmus, the New Zealanders of No. 67 Fighter Squadron (the only **RAF** squadron in the country), were pitting their Buffaloes against the Japanese at odds of one to eight. It was of paramount importance that the great port of **Rangoon**—vital as the sea terminus for the **Burma** Road and supply link to **China**—should be preserved as far as possible from damaging air attacks. The first raid on **Rangoon** was made by the Japanese on 23 December with a force of some sixty bombers and fighters.

At Mingaladon aerodrome on the outskirts of the city, No. 67 Squadron received adequate warning of the enemy's approach and took off to intercept, in company with a squadron of the American Volunteer Group which had arrived from Loiwing, in **China**, three days before. Sergeant C. V. Bargh <sup>31</sup> and Sergeant G. A. Williams <sup>32</sup> were in R/T \* communication with the ground control when the raiders were sighted. Instead of the time-honoured 'Tally-ho', there came over the radio link the excited voice of Sergeant Bargh: 'Hell! Showers of 'em, look Willie! Showers of 'em!'

For a first combat the results were impressive. In a moment Bargh was in amongst the Japanese fixed-undercarriage 96 and 97 type fighters, and immediately became involved in a confused series of most hazardous dogfights. It had been drilled into the pilots that their primary object was to shoot down the bombers, and Bargh, by his single-handed manoeuvres, succeeded in drawing the Japanese fighter escort away from the formation.

As in **Malaya**, a New Zealander drew first blood. Sergeant Williams saw his opportunity and calmly proceeded to carry out 'copy-book' attacks on the enemy bombers, shooting down one and getting bursts of machine-gun fire into the petrol tanks of some six more. As the Japanese tanks were not self-sealing, it is probable that some of these aircraft failed to return to base.



**In the meantime, with his aircraft shot full of holes, Bargh dived away from the enemy fighters, flew out to sea, and regained height to await the return of the bombers. His windscreen had oiled up but, nothing daunted, he took off one of his flying boots, wiped the perspex clean with his sock, and turned in to attack the bombers as they came away from the target. Joined now by Sergeant E. H. Beable <sup>33</sup> at 17,000 feet, he dived on the enemy formation and succeeded in destroying one bomber and probably a fighter. Beable fired a long burst into a bomber which, last seen trailing smoke, he claimed as a 'probable'.**

**Sergeant W. Christiansen, <sup>34</sup> though slightly later in sighting the enemy, attacked at the first opportunity. His own words describe the combat:**

**'I climbed to 16,000 feet and did a front-quarter attack, opening fire at 400 yards and breaking away at approximately 100 yards. I broke away to the front of the formation and repeated this attack. My windscreen was covered with oil, making it impossible for me to observe the results of my attacks. I did three more front-quarter attacks and then broke away as I couldn't see out of my front windscreen. I was firing at 12,000 feet when I saw another formation 1000 feet below me. I dived and did a climbing stern attack by pointing my aircraft at the formation and firing. I could not aim or see any results as by then visibility through my windscreen was nil. The formation headed out to sea in a north-easterly direction and I returned to base to refuel.'**

**The remainder of the squadron and the American Volunteer Group had a very satisfactory total score for the day of thirteen enemy aircraft destroyed and several probables. Of these, No. 67 Squadron was able to claim six destroyed and three probables without loss to themselves — a highly creditable performance in their first encounter. Nevertheless, many of the bombers had succeeded in getting through to the target and both **Mingaladon** and **Rangoon** were heavily attacked. At Mingaladon one of the first bombs demolished the operations room, two airmen being killed and two Buffaloes destroyed on the ground. For all that the**

squadron was well pleased with the day's work and morale was high. All hands set to work to build another operations room, and by the evening of the following day this was completed. The aircraft were again brought to maximum serviceability and the pilots waited at 'readiness' for the next attack, living on somewhat scratch meals owing to the disappearance of all the native mess staff.

They did not have long to wait. About eleven o'clock on Christmas morning the warning system reported 120 enemy aircraft heading for **Rangoon**, from the direction of **Mergui** on the Tenasserim coast. Twenty-four Buffaloes and Tomahawks scrambled immediately.

This time, apparently somewhat shaken by their previous reception, the Japanese paid our pilots the pretty (if back-handed) compliment of despatching some eighty fighters with their raiding force, including a number of **Navy** 'O' or Zero type, which had not previously operated in this locality. Heavily outnumbered, the defenders met them on the way in, but the fighter opposition was so intense that only Williams and one other pilot got through to the bombers. They speedily shot down one, of which each claimed a half share. Williams then attacked a fighter, raked it from end to end, and saw it go down out of control. He was then 'jumped' from behind so was unable to see it hit the ground.

Pilot Officer G. S. Sharp <sup>35</sup> and Sergeant E. E. Pedersen, <sup>36</sup> meeting a fierce attack by an almost overwhelming number of Japanese fighters with height advantage, fought their way through after shooting up three of them. Sharp forced-landed on **Mingaladon** with some controls and electric cables cut and a bullet hole in the ammunition tank.

Meanwhile, Beable was making the most of the opportunities that came his way, and in three separate attacks he blew up a Zero that was on his leader's tail and claimed a 'possible' and a 'damaged'. From each of these combats he had to dive away to evade enemy fighters, but returned to the fray until his guns would no longer fire. Sergeant J. G. Finn, <sup>37</sup> who was with him at first, was attacked before he could reach the bombers, but in turning he was able to fire a good burst into the

wing root of an enemy fighter; a bright flame leapt from its petrol tank.

The indefatigable Bargh was caught on the climb, but got a burst into a fighter which immediately began to trail smoke. He then had to dive to ground level before shaking off a Zero which had got on his tail. By the time he had climbed back into the fray the enemy had disappeared and he had to be content with one probable. Sergeant K. A. Rutherford <sup>38</sup> raked a bomber but was 'jumped' by three Zeros and had to dive away without a claim.

The Tomahawks of the American Volunteer Group had a field day and claimed twenty-one destroyed, giving a total from all sources of twenty-seven destroyed, two probables, and two damaged. Thus in the course of two raids the Japanese lost over forty aircraft out of some 180, against which there had been never more than twenty-five British and American fighters. No. 67 Squadron lost Sergeants J. MacPherson, <sup>39</sup> E. B. Hewitt, <sup>40</sup> and R. P. McNabb <sup>41</sup> ( **RNZAF**) and Flying Officer J. Lambert ( **RAF**) killed.

The Japanese did not appear inclined to face a repetition of such fighting and **Rangoon** remained virtually free from attack until 23 January 1942. Thus, in the opening stages of the air war in **Burma**, a creditable victory was achieved by the Allied fighter force which ensured the safe disembarkation of reinforcements, including the 7th Armoured Brigade, at **Rangoon**.

Back on the ground at **Mingaladon** on Christmas morning conditions were far from normal. The airfield and surroundings had been thoroughly pattern-bombed and all native labour had disappeared. Cooks and kitchens had vanished and, instead of sitting down to Christmas dinner, all hands were employed filling bomb craters on the airfield and repairing damaged aircraft against the possibility of another raid next day. That night the pilots had their Christmas supper—bully beef and beer. The Supreme Commander, General Sir Archibald Wavell, and the Governor of **Burma**, Sir Reginald Dorman-Smith, visited the station and warmly congratulated all ranks, not only on their splendid defeat of the

enemy but on their efforts in repairing the damage and having the squadron again at maximum readiness.

The Buffaloes were dispersed around the airfield and meals were brought round by truck, and although the pilots waiting for the next attack knew only too well the odds against them—and only those who have waited for the enemy in such circumstances can appreciate the sense of strain—there was never any indication of jumpiness. Before dawn the flight truck would roll up to the dispersal hut and yawning pilots would jump out to disentangle their flying gear from the heap on the bench. Outside, in the keen air of the early dawn, the silence would be split by the sudden crackle of Cyclone engines bursting into life, blue flames licking back from the motors as they were run up.

Rutherford, a sheep farmer from **Canterbury** and wise in the ways of bushcraft, could usually be found building a fire—at a safe distance between the aircraft and the hut—to brew the inevitable tea. Christiansen and Cutfield <sup>42</sup> developed the routine of a morning session of ‘Acey Deuce’, a game very popular with the pilots of the American Volunteer Group. Other pilots, deciding that an opportunity to sleep was not to be lightly tossed aside, would stretch themselves comfortably on a pile of parachutes and flying gear, while some would make the most of a chance to repair equipment. Before long the mess truck would arrive with supplies of eggs and bacon, soon to be sizzling in the frying pan. Then a rattle of cutlery and laughter as they gathered round to breakfast from huge sandwiches composed of a fried egg on a slice of bacon held between two planks of bread. The carefree manner, cheery banter, and spirit of comradeship among all ranks gave their life something denied to those whose lot is cast in a more peaceful mould.

Because of the importance of defending **Rangoon**, the Air Officer Commanding (Air Vice- Marshal D. F. Stevenson) could not spare any aircraft from the tiny force at his disposal to take the war to the enemy, and until reinforcements of Hurricanes and Blenheims began to arrive in January he could give very little support to the Army. No. 67 Squadron carried out an occasional photographic reconnaissance to obtain

information on Japanese air concentrations in **Thailand**, and as a result of one such flight the Buffaloes were sent on a strafing attack on Mesoht aerodrome. The attack was a complete surprise. The aerodrome buildings were thoroughly strafed, an aircraft at the west end of the runway shot up, and a large fire started. Rutherford concentrated on the hangars and received several hits from light anti-aircraft fire. Sergeant E. L. Sadler <sup>43</sup> claimed a 'flamer' on the ground, the enemy aircraft firing back at him from its stationary position as he flashed over it. The whole operation was over in a few minutes and the Buffaloes returned without loss.

While on patrol down the Tenasserim over **Tavoy**, Pilot Officer P. M. Brewer <sup>44</sup> crept up on a single-engined two-seater aircraft. His first burst must have killed the observer as there was no return fire; no evasive action was taken by the enemy aircraft, which caught fire and crashed into the hills.

Towards the end of January the long looked-for and sorely-needed air reinforcements began to arrive. The fighter strength was augmented by thirty-six Hurricanes which were distributed amongst Nos. 17, 135, and 136 Squadrons; pilots for these squadrons, including several New Zealanders, had already arrived from England and the **Middle East**. Reinforced by these three fighter squadrons and by No. 113 Bomber Squadron equipped with Mark II Blenheims, the Air Officer Commanding was able to attack occupied airfields in **Thailand** and so reduce the scale of air attack on **Rangoon**. To achieve this he commenced a 'leaning forward' evolution with a portion of the fighter force, and from advanced bases at **Moulmein**, **Tavoy**, and **Mergui** resolutely attacked enemy aircraft wherever found. This policy brought encouraging results, fifty-eight enemy bombers and fighters being destroyed and many more damaged.

# **EPIISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2**

## **NO. 113 BOMBER SQUADRON**

## ***No. 113 Bomber Squadron***

**No. 113 Squadron also inflicted much damage on the enemy at this time. Six New Zealanders flew with the squadron—Squadron Leader P. Duggan-Smith <sup>45</sup> and Flight Sergeant J. Keys <sup>46</sup> (pilots) and Sergeants A. M. Dingle, <sup>47</sup> J. Beard, <sup>48</sup> E. Brooking, <sup>49</sup> and J. B. J. McKenzie <sup>50</sup> (navigators). On 7 January, the night of its arrival at **Mingaladon** from the **Middle East**, the squadron despatched ten Blenheims to carry out a raid on **Bangkok** in which 11,000 lb. of bombs were dropped on the dock area. This operation, undertaken so soon after arrival, was most creditable, particularly on the part of the navigators. Next day, because facilities at **Mingaladon** were poor, the Blenheims flew out to **Lashio**, near the Chinese border, to be serviced. They returned on 18 January and began operations at high pressure, both in support of the retreating army and in long-range bombing of enemy airfields and bases. Mesoht aerodrome was again attacked by shallow dive-bombing from 2700 feet, the runways being pitted and several fires started. In succeeding days the squadron's activities included strikes on the **Thailand** airfields at Tak and Messareing, whilst a transport convoy was attacked near Kawareik.**

**On 24 January another night raid was made on **Bangkok**, all serviceable aircraft participating. The Blenheims attacked singly at ten-minute intervals, bombing from 2000 feet with a war load of four 250 lb. bombs and four 25 lb. incendiaries. Large explosions and several fires resulted. An intense anti-aircraft barrage was again encountered over the target area, and two aircraft, including one navigated by Sergeant Dingle, failed to return. The Japanese retaliated with persistent bombing of **Mingaladon**, and No. 113 Squadron was withdrawn north to Taungoo in the Sittang Valley. A detached flight remained in the **Rangoon** area, being dispersed at Zayat Kwin and Johnny Walker satellite strips.**

**Operations now included attacks on enemy river traffic near Kado, north of **Moulmein**, as well as further raids on **Bangkok**. During the third week after its arrival No. 113 Squadron made 102 sorties and dropped**

**89,992 lb. of bombs on the enemy. Although, like the fighters, there were too few bombers to affect the final outcome materially, there can be no doubt that these operations did much to check the Japanese advance at a vital period.**

**Throughout February the squadron carried out a variety of attacks and hit the enemy wherever he could be found. River steamers, railways, barracks, troop concentrations and stores dumps all received attention, until on 18 February, after a month of continual flying, the land threat to Zayat Kwin made this airfield untenable and the detached flight was withdrawn to Magwe. The squadron continued to operate from Magwe until 7 March, when the fall of **Rangoon** and the advance of the enemy made it necessary to withdraw to **India**. From its new base the squadron continued to support the retreating army.**



# **EPIISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2**

## **FIGHTER OPERATIONS**

## *Fighter Operations*

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# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

### *BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES*

<sup>1</sup>Sergeant T. S. TANNER; born **Wellington**, 11 Aug 1918; engineer; killed on operations 26 Jan 1942.

<sup>2</sup>Sergeant A. M. H. FLEMING; born **Wellington**, 16 Jan 1912; farmer; killed on operations 26 Jan 1942.

<sup>3</sup>Flight Lieutenant R. C. BARCLAY, DFC; **Auckland**; born **Dunedin**, 27 Feb 1916; salesman.

<sup>4</sup>Wing Commander L. G. W. LILLY; born **Manchester**, England, 1 Aug 1917; **Royal Air Force**.

<sup>5</sup>Sergeant D. S. HUNTER; born **Wellington**, 21 Feb 1917; killed on operations 4 Feb 1942.

<sup>6</sup>Squadron Leader E. J. HENRY; born **Rangiora**, 3 May 1917.

<sup>7</sup>Squadron Leader I. JULIAN, DFC; **Lower Hutt**; born **TeKuiti**, 20 Oct 1917; salesman; p.w.( **Java**) Mar 1942; released Aug 1945.

<sup>8</sup>Squadron Leader E. C. GARTRELL, DFC; RNZAF Station, **Ohakea**; born **Palmerston North**, 9 Nov 1918; clerk; wounded 2 Mar 1942; p.w. 18 Mar 1942; released 16 Sep 1945.

<sup>9</sup>Wing Commander W. G. CLOUSTON, DFC; **London**; born **Auckland**, 15 Jan 1916; **Royal Air Force**; commanded 488 Sqn 1941-42; p.w. **Singapore**, Feb 1942; released Aug 1945.

<sup>10</sup>Squadron Leader J. N. MACKENZIE, DFC; **London**; born **Goodwood**, 11 Aug 1914; **RAF**.

<sup>11</sup>Squadron Leader J. R. HUTCHESON, DFC; **Lower Hutt**; born **Wellington**, 18

**Mar 1912; salesman.**

**<sup>12</sup>Squadron Leader C. W. FRANKS, MBE; born Leithfield, 12 Jul 1912; civil servant.**

**<sup>13</sup>Pilot Officer R. S. SHIELDS; born Napier, 29 Sep 1918; farmhand; killed on operations 5 Jan 1942.**

**<sup>14</sup>Flight Lieutenant C. B. WAREHAM, DFM; Wellington; born Kaikoura, 4 Mar 1916; farmer.**

**<sup>15</sup>Warrant Officer B. S. WIPITI, DFM; born New Plymouth, 16 Jan 1922; refrigeration serviceman; killed on operations 3 Oct 1943.**

**<sup>16</sup>Warrant Officer W. J. N. MACINTOSH; Invercargill; born Wyndham, 12 Jun 1915; driver; p.w. 21 Mar 1942; released 16 Sep 1945.**

**<sup>17</sup>Warrant Officer T. W. HONAN; Takapuna; born New Plymouth, 30 Aug 1916; sheepfarmer; wounded 12 Jan 1942.**

**<sup>18</sup>Flight Lieutenant R. W. MACMILLAN; Mangakino; born Timaru, 2 Oct 1918; school teacher.**

**<sup>19</sup>Pilot Officer P. E. E. KILLICK; born Wellington, 12 Jul 1920; clerk.**

**<sup>20</sup>Pilot Officer V. E. MEACLEM; Ashburton; born Ashburton, 10 Nov 1920; clerk.**

**<sup>21</sup>Pilot Officer G. L. HESKETH; born Auckland 24 Feb 1915; law clerk; killed on operations 15 Jan 1942.**

**<sup>22</sup>Master Pilot E. E. G. KUHN, DFM; Wellington; born Wellington, 14 Sep 1919; mechanic; p.w. Mar 1942; released Sep 1945.**

**<sup>23</sup>Flying Officer N. C. SHARP, DFC; born Auckland, 9 Feb 1922; bank clerk; killed on operations 1 Feb 1943.**

**<sup>24</sup>Pilot Officer E. W. COX; born Christchurch, 27 Nov 1919; clerk; killed on operations 18 Jan 1942.**



- <sup>25</sup>Flight Lieutenant H. J. MEHARRY; born Reefton, 6 Jul 1917; commercial traveller; presumed killed on operations 5 Aug 1944.**
- <sup>26</sup>Pilot Officer L. R. FARR; born Auckland, 22 Mar 1917; clerk; died of wounds 25 Jan 1942.**
- <sup>27</sup>Flight Lieutenant P. D. GIFFORD, m.i.d.; Doyleston; born Christchurch, 14 Apr 1915; school teacher.**
- <sup>28</sup>Flight Lieutenant J. REES, BEM; RNZAF Station, Whenuapai; born Thames, 28 Dec 1914; student.**
- <sup>29</sup>Squadron Leader E. C. SMART; born NZ, 11 Jun 1903; engineer, Public Works Department.**
- <sup>30</sup>Squadron Leader A. G. BEGG; Dunedin; born Dunedin, 8 Jul 1901; civil engineer.**
- <sup>31</sup>Flight Lieutenant C. V. BARGH, DFC; Pihautea, Featherston; born Carterton, 20 Sep 1921; farmer.**
- <sup>32</sup>Flight Lieutenant G. A. WILLIAMS, DFM; Napier; born Napier, 29 Apr 1918; builder's apprentice.**
- <sup>33</sup>Flight Lieutenant E. H. BEABLE; Hangatiki, King Country; born Auckland, 12 Nov 1920; clerk.**
- <sup>34</sup>Flying Officer W. CHRISTIANSEN; born Frankton Junction, 16 Oct 1920; clerk; killed on operations 9 Apr 1943.**
- <sup>35</sup>Squadron Leader G. S. SHARP, DSO; Oamaru; born Gisborne, 8 Jul 1912; school teacher.**
- <sup>36</sup>Pilot Officer E. E. PEDERSEN; born Taihape, 2 Mar 1916; orchard worker; killed on operations 18 Mar 1943.**
- <sup>37</sup>Sergeant J. G. FINN; born Winton, 6 Nov 1919; clerk; killed on operations 20 Jan 1942.**

**<sup>38</sup>Flight Lieutenant K. A. RUTHERFORD, DFC; Hawarden; born Christchurch, 26 Oct 1918; sheepfarmer.**

**<sup>39</sup>Sergeant J. MACPHERSON; born Otautau, 21 Jan 1916; survey chainman; killed on operations 25 Dec 1941.**

**<sup>40</sup>Sergeant E. B. HEWITT; born Opotiki, 11 Sep 1922; student; killed on operations 25 Dec 1941.**

**<sup>41</sup>Sergeant R. P. McNABB; born Wellington, 23 May 1922; garage assistant; killed on operations 25 Dec 1941.**

**<sup>42</sup>Warrant Officer P. T. CUTFIELD; Papatoetoe, Auckland; born Papatoetoe, 28 Jul 1918; clerk.**

**<sup>43</sup>Flying Officer E. L. SADLER; born Tynemouth, England, 9 Jun 1916; clerk; killed on operations 26 Mar 1943.**

**<sup>44</sup>Pilot Officer P. M. BREWER; born Wellington, 14 Apr 1919; clerk; killed on operations 20 Jan 1942.**

**<sup>45</sup>Squadron Leader P. DUGGAN-SMITH, DFC; born England, 14 Mar 1916; shipping company cadet.**

**<sup>46</sup>Flying Officer J. KEYS; Auckland; born London, 25 Oct 1920; warehouseman.**

**<sup>47</sup>Sergeant A. M. DINGLE; born Hamilton, 7 Nov 1917; farmer; killed on operations 24 Jan 1942.**

**<sup>48</sup>Flight Sergeant J. H. BEARD; Dunedin; born Dunedin, 16 May 1911; furrier.**

**<sup>49</sup>Warrant Officer E. BROOKING; Auckland; born Auckland, 31 Jan 1922; shop assistant.**

**<sup>50</sup>Warrant Officer J. B. J. MCKENZIE; Tamahere, Hamilton; born Auckland, 23 Oct 1919; bank clerk.**

<sup>51</sup>Flight Lieutenant A. A. COOPER; **Wanganui**; born **Palmerston North**, 11  
Sep 1919; clerk.

**The occupations given are those on enlistment.**

# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

### *ACKNOWLEDGMENTS*

**THE NARRATIVE** was compiled from information supplied by members of the units concerned and from documents made available by the **Royal Air Force** Historical Branch, **Air Ministry, London**, including the official despatches of Air Chief Marshal Sir Robert Brooke-Popham, GCVO, KCB, CMG, DSO, AFC, Lieutenant-General A. E. Percival, CB, DSO, OBE, MC, Air Vice-Marshal Sir Paul Maltby, KBE, CB, DSO, AFC, and Air Vice-Marshal D. F. Stevenson, CB, CBE, DSO, MC and bar; and the operations record books of Nos. 67 and 113 Squadrons, **Royal Air Force**.

Acknowledgment is also made to F. A. McCarthy for material dealing with No. 1 **Aerodrome Construction Squadron**. The photographs were supplied by the Royal Air Force Historical Branch, with these exceptions which are from the collections of *T. M. O'Connell* page 15 ( *top* and *bottom*), *F. A. McCarthy* pages 16 and 17, and *K. A. Rutherford* page 18 ( *top left* and *bottom*). The maps are by L. D. McCormick from material supplied by the **Air Ministry**.

# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## [BACKMATTER]

**THE AUTHOR: Flight Lieutenant H. R. Dean, DFC, of Porangahau, Hawke's Bay, served during the war as a wireless operator-air gunner and signals leader in No. 2 (BR) Squadron, RNZAF, and later on No. 40 (Transport) Squadron.**

# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## [BACKMATTER]

THE TYPE USED THROUGHOUT THE SERIES IS *Aldine Bembo* WHICH WAS REVIVED FOR MONOTYPE FROM A RARE BOOK PRINTED BY ALDUS IN 1495 \* THE TEXT IS SET IN 12 POINT ON A BODY OF 14 POINT

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## 'THE OTHER SIDE OF THE HILL'

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NEW ZEALAND IN THE SECOND WORLD WAR  
Official History



### 'The Other Side of the Hill'

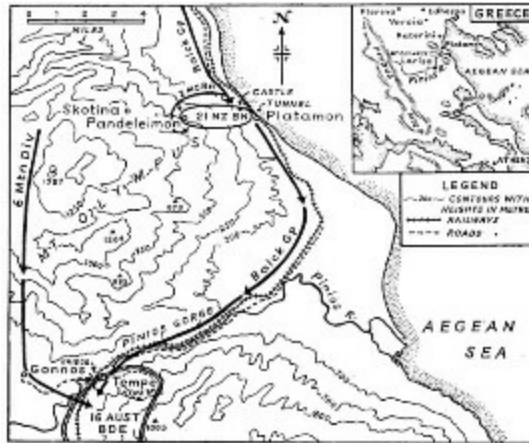
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1945

### 'The Other Side of the Hill'

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| II. The New Zealand Expeditionary Force      | W. E. Stewart  |
| III. The New Zealand Division in the Pacific | R. G. G. G. G. |
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| V. The New Zealand Division in the Pacific   | R. G. G. G.    |

# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

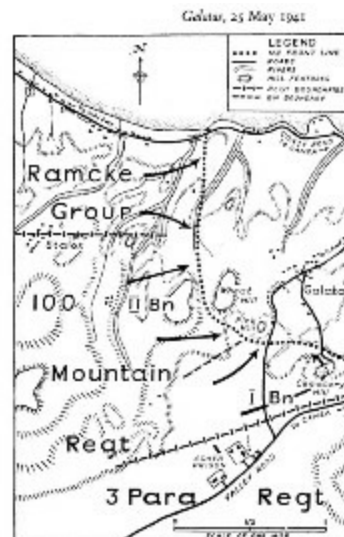
## [FRONTISPIECE]



*Actions at Platamon and in the Pinios Gorge*  
6 Mountain Division crossed the eastern slopes of Mount Olympus, the south-eastern ridges of which are shown on this map.

### *Actions at Platamon and in the Pinios Gorge*

**6 Mountain Division crossed the eastern slopes of Mount Olympus, the south-eastern ridges of which are shown on this map**



**Galatas, 25 May 1941**

### **COVER PHOTOGRAPH**

**Men of 5 German Mountain Division waiting to embark for Crete in Junkers troop-carriers**

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[TITLE PAGE]

## **'The Other Side of the Hill'**

**I : *Panzer Attack in Greece***

**II : *Galatas***

**III : *Ruweisat Ridge***

**R. WALKER**

**IV : *The 'Left Hook' at El Agheila***

**V : *Panzer Grenadiers in the Senio Bridgehead***

**WAR HISTORY BRANCH**

**DEPARTMENT OF INTERNAL AFFAIRS WELLINGTON, NEW ZEALAND**

**1952**

# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

[EDITORPAGE]

*'Why, I have spent all my life in trying to guess what was at the other side of the hill.'*

The Duke of **Wellington**, as quoted in Croker's Correspondence and Diaries (1884 edition), Vol. III, p. 275.

The German Army records, war diaries and reports, even reports of telephone conversations, are now lodged at **Washington** as the joint property of the American and British Governments. They are very complete and detailed except for the last months of the war when the machine was breaking down. Those relating to operations in which New Zealand troops were engaged have been translated by Mr. Denham Dawson, a member of the **War History Branch** staff, who spent two years in **Washington** on the task. For nearly every action we have the enemy story almost as fully as our own, the units engaged, their commanders (with the personal records of the latter), their orders, messages and reports. Occasionally a failure is glossed over, which happens in all armies, but on the whole they are accurate and reliable. It is not often that military historians have this advantage and it is being fully used in the campaign volumes under preparation.

The studies in this number were prepared by the War History narrators engaged in the preparation of these volumes. They give a good idea of what happened on the other side of the hill.

**H. K. KIPPENBERGER**

,  
*Major-General*

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

### *Acknowledgments*

**THE MAPS** are by L. D. McCormick and the paintings by **R. L. Kay**, page **19** ( top) and U. L. Moller, page **20** ( bottom left). The photographs come from captured German prints and from German publications, with these exceptions, which are from the collections of:

*21 NZ Battalion* page **13** ( top and bottom) and page **15** ( bottom)

*Dr. K. Bringmann ( Germany)* page **16** ( top left)

*18 NZ Battalion* page **18** ( top)

*J. C. Holmes* page **18** ( bottom)

*F. T. Allan* page **19** ( bottom)

*New Zealand Army Official, G. F. Kaye* page **20** ( bottom right)

# **EPIISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2**

## **I: PANZER ATTACK IN GREECE**

## *I: Panzer Attack in Greece*

**EARLY** in April 1941 the German 12th Army invaded **Greece** with ten divisions. In the north-west 40 Corps, commanded by General Stumme,<sup>1</sup> swept almost unopposed through **Yugoslavia** in three days and broke through the British and Greek positions to threaten **Kozani**. In view of this unexpected success the Army Commander, Field Marshal List,<sup>2</sup> decided to attack the Allied positions between **Katerini** and **Florina** with two corps. Forty Corps was to attack in the **Edhessa- Florina** area with three divisions; 18 Corps, which with **30 Corps** had broken through the mountain passes to capture **Salonika**, was to attack between **Katerini** and **Edhessa** with four divisions. List proposed to rely on 40 Corps to turn the Allied position, and he directed 18 Corps to push through the **Olympus Pass** and also to move down the coast road and advance on **Larisa** through the **Pinios Gorge**, better known as the Vale of Tempe. Thus 18 Corps' task became one of pursuit, with the object of cutting off the Allied forces between **Olympus** and the Pindus Mountains.

The Allied force, chiefly **2 New Zealand Division** and **6 Australian Division** (grouped as Anzac Corps under General T. A. Blamey), and 1 (British) Armoured Brigade, together with the few ill-equipped Greek troops that could be spared from **Greece's** memorable struggle with **Italy** in **Albania**, was disposed under General Sir H. M. Wilson between **Platamon** on the coast and the uncertain flank of the Greek army at Lake Kastoria. Wilson decided on 13 April to withdraw all British troops to the **Thermopylae** line. The success of such a movement now depended on the defence of the narrow pass at **Platamon** between **Olympus** and the sea, and the subsequent defence of the **Pinios Gorge**. Should Larisa, an essential key-point where all important roads from the north converged, be taken by 18 Corps before the withdrawal was completed, List would succeed in his object of cutting off the Allied force. Wilson, at this stage, anticipated the greater threat from 40 Corps, and his rearguards were so disposed.

At Platamon 21 NZ Battalion, commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel N.

**L. Macky, had dug in with orders to defend the coastal pass until instructed to withdraw. Macky was told that the country ahead of him was quite unsuitable for tank movement, and that he need only expect infantry attacks. Supporting 21 Battalion were the four 25-pounders of A Troop 5 NZ Field Regiment, commanded by Lieutenant L. G. Williams, and a section of engineers from 19 NZ Army Troops Company, commanded by Lieutenant F. W. O. Jones.**

**Such was the situation when General Boehme, <sup>3</sup> the ‘calm, deliberate, conscientious and thorough’ commander of 18 Corps, instructed 2 Panzer Division to capture Katerini and carry on the advance on both sides of Mount Olympus. The 6th Mountain Division was to close up on the high ground between Veroia and the Olympus Pass and was to be in a position to push forward towards Katerini, or to the area south of Servia, according to how the situation developed.**

**The 2nd Motor Cycle Battalion from 2 Panzer Division, reinforced with engineer, artillery and machine-gun detachments, was leading the way, and by the evening of 14 April had reached the north-east slopes of Mount Olympus. Reconnaissance elements pushed on towards Pandeimon and had not gone far when they saw soldiers lounging in pits on the forward slopes of a flat-topped ridge. A ruined castle dominated the ridge where it ended abruptly at the sea. Judging by the casual attitude of the soldiers the patrol believed that its advance had not been observed, but soon guns opened up from behind the castle and prevented any movement. Then the guns, evidently attracted by the rest of 2 Motor Cycle Battalion moving up behind the patrol, increased their range and the patrol reported back.**

**The reconnaissance report, combined with the sound of demolitions that began at dusk and seemed to get farther and farther away, led to the conclusion that the British were occupying only the ridge near the castle and not the hills about it. The commander of 2 Motor Cycle Battalion decided to attack at first light next morning. Meanwhile General Veiel <sup>4</sup> of 2 Panzer Division, still mostly to the north of Katerini, had formed two groups to carry out his task. One group, the**



main body of the division, was to force the **Olympus Pass**, while the other, the reinforced Motor Cycle Battalion, was to be joined by  $\frac{1}{3}$  Panzer Regiment (100 tanks), 11/304 Infantry Regiment (one battalion—not to go forward immediately), and two batteries of artillery. The coastal group was to be commanded by Colonel Balck, 3 Panzer Regiment, a hard, strong-willed man who later commanded an Army Group.

During the night of 14-15 April 2 Motor Cycle Battalion formed up to attack the castle, concentrating behind a ridge with the object of attacking the inland flank. Shelling from behind the castle, an irritated diarist says, 'plagued us, front and rear, right and left... things were damned sour with us for a while'. In the morning, after a brief artillery bombardment, the battalion moved forward, making good progress until it reached the forward slopes of the castle ridge. Here a 'murderous fire' broke out, and the leading company suffered heavy casualties, including the company commander. The companies on the west flank found unexpected opposition, and a reconnaissance patrol was sent out to determine 21 Battalion's left flank. This patrol brought back the disconcerting information that the ridge was held as far inland as the village of **Pandeleimon**.

Colonel Balck arrived to take command at two o'clock in the afternoon. He found that the Motor Cycle Battalion had gone to ground in the tangled undergrowth, boulders and scrub on the forward slopes of castle ridge. Balck gave instructions for the battalion to be withdrawn and reformed. It was then to move out in a wide encircling movement to attack 21 Battalion from above **Pandeleimon**, while  $\frac{1}{3}$  Panzer Regiment attacked frontally at the coast. This regiment, commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel Decker,<sup>5</sup> had been ordered up from north of **Katerini** that morning. The roads were crammed with traffic, but the tank battalion rushed up, 'disregarding all obstacles in its path... a few other vehicles learnt by experience that their mud guards and radiators are not so hard as tanks'. The tanks reached **Katerini** at two-thirty in the afternoon and **Platamon** just before six o'clock.

Balck ordered the tanks to attack immediately. The whole of  $\frac{1}{3}$  Panzer Regiment pushed to within 1200 metres of the castle and deployed to support the unit's light platoon of five Mark II tanks. These advanced on the castle by a narrow cart track, the only means of approach. A terrific fire from rifles, machine guns, and mortars met the tanks, but it was evident that no anti-tank guns protected the castle. The rough country prevented the tanks from closing in, although one tank almost reached a weapon pit. All five of the Mark IIs shed their tracks on boulders and were abandoned under cover of darkness. The regiment suffered no casualties during this attack.

Meanwhile, 2 Motor Cycle Battalion had been attacking C Company 21 Battalion at Pandeimon. Three of the four companies attacked, as the fourth company had been pinned down in front of the castle until after dark when trying to disengage earlier in the afternoon. One company swung well round over country that was 'terribly difficult, mountainous and pathless, with slopes of 700 metres to surmount', and reached **Skotina**. By some error the two companies attacking frontally made contact before the outflanking company had got into place, and although some positions were siezed at great cost, they were all lost during a sharp counter-attack. The Motor Cycle Battalion called the attack off until dawn next morning, but remained in position close to **Pandeimon**. Colonel Balck, after the failure of both tank and infantry attacks, reported to **2 Panzer Division**:

The fight for the castle began at nightfall. End not yet in sight. Very fierce resistance, and terrible country.

In the meantime General Boehme had issued a Corps order stating that **2 Panzer Division**'s main effort was now to be between **Olympus** and the sea, with **Larisa** as its objective. The 6th Mountain Division was to assist by capturing the northern foothills of **Olympus** west of Pandeimon, and should **2 Panzer Division** be further delayed at **Platamon**, was to move through the mountains to Gonnos to attack the **Platamon** and Pinios positions from the rear. A special patrol from 6

**Mountain Division** was to climb **Mount Olympus** with the German flag—the swastika would pay homage to Zeus.

Elements from **8/800 Brandenburg Regiment**, a special unit largely recruited from Germans familiar with foreign countries to undertake intelligence or sabotage tasks, were to outflank the **Platamon** position by sea in one motor boat and three assault boats. The force was to sail up the **Pinios** to capture the traffic bridge. <sup>6</sup>

That night, 15-16 April, **2 Panzer Division** sent up reinforcements—**1/304 Infantry Regiment** and more engineers and artillery. The Germans now had 100 tanks, one battalion of infantry (1026 men), the reinforced **Motor Cycle Battalion** (more than 1050 men), **1/74 Artillery Regiment** (twelve 105-millimetre and four 150-millimetre guns), and other artillery and specialist units. These opposed **21 Battalion**, one troop of 25-pounders and one section of engineers, a total of little more than 700 men. So effective had been the fire from the four 25-pounders that **2 Panzer Division** estimated that from two to three troops (8-12 guns) were in support of the castle position.

**Balck** decided to attack again from front and flank. The **2nd Motor Cycle Battalion** was to re-attack **Pandeleimon**, supported this time by **1/304 Infantry Regiment**;  $\frac{1}{3}$  **Panzer Regiment**, with one company of infantry under command, was to attack frontally; the artillery was to fire a preliminary bombardment and would then give close support. To **Balck's** annoyance contact was lost during the night between tanks, infantry and motor cyclists, and it was not possible to synchronise the attack.

At nine o'clock in the morning of the 16th, following a deception attack at first light, the bombardment started against the castle and surrounding field positions. On the flank the **Motor Cycle Battalion** attacked with one company moving up behind **Pandeleimon**, the other three on front and flank. After a very bitter struggle with little success the appearance of **1/304 Infantry Regiment** coming up to give support turned the tide, and **Pandeleimon** was captured with all field positions in

**the area. Success gave the opportunity to move down the ridge along a good track to roll up the rest of 21 Battalion.**

**The tanks had been accompanied by engineers to help force a passage, and their story is well told by a participant:**

**The right-hand company of tanks forced its way forward through scrub and over rocks, and in spite of the steepness of the hillsides got to the top of the ridge. The country was a mass of wire obstacles and swarming with the enemy. In the thick scrub visibility was scarcely a yard from the tanks, and hardly a trace was to be seen of the enemy except an occasional infantryman running back. The tanks pressed forward along a narrow mule path. Many of them shed their tracks on the boulders, or split their track assemblies, and finally the leading troop ran on to mines ... and completely blocked the path. A detour was attempted. Two more tanks stuck in a swamp and another was blown up on a mine....**

**Colonel Macky withdrew his battalion a few minutes before ten o'clock, and Balck signalled to **2 Panzer Division** that the castle had been captured at five past ten; he said that his forward units had suffered 25 per cent casualties. The 21st Battalion got clean away, crossed the Pinios River, and by nightfall reached the village of **Tempe** at the western end of the gorge; its casualties had been light—36 killed, wounded and missing.**

**The Germans tried to press the pursuit, but immediate advance was impossible as the tanks could not get down the castle ridge. The infantry, badly mauled, needed reorganising. The tunnel through which the railway passed the castle ridge almost at the edge of the sea had been so thoroughly blown that the engineers estimated it would take five days to clear. Actually temporary repairs were effected sooner, but as late as 20 April engineers reported that the tunnel kept falling in and no set time could be given for repairs. One company of tanks tried to get forward along the edge of the sea but found this impossible. In the end the tanks were towed over the ridge, such a slow process that only 25-30 tanks had been got across by eleven o'clock next day.**

On 17 April 21 Battalion was joined by 16 Australian Brigade Group, for General Wilson had now realised the danger to his right flank. Brigadier A. S. Allen, who took command with the task of barring the way to **Larisa**, deployed his force—three battalions including 21 Battalion —east and west of **Tempe** village on the south side of the river. The Germans carried on with their plans for getting through to **Larisa** in time to cut off the British troops: Balck was to push through the **Pinios Gorge**, and was further reinforced with 11/304 Infantry Regiment; 6 Mountain Division, in view of the delays imposed on **2 Panzer Division**, was to march through the mountains to Gonnos.

Balck's troops got away from a bad start:

The coast road was a quagmire as a result of the heavy rains, and was impassable. The tunnel could not be repaired.... Tanks were moving forward ... but all petrol for them had to be manhandled up. Ground heavily mined ... 149 wounded in hospital at **Katerini** and a large number more still with the forward troops....

It was midday before the forward troops reached the Pinios at the east end of the gorge, followed by the first of the tanks which had bumped down the coast from **Platamon** on the railway track. The walls of the gorge rose steeply on both sides of the Pinios River. On the south side the road wound and twisted just above the riverbed, while on the north side the railway line clung to the narrow river bank. The reconnaissance squadron of 6 Mountain Division, which had moved down to the mouth of the Gorge from the hills while the rest of the division carried on to Gonnos, had already found that the bridges and ferry had been demolished and that the railway line was effectively blocked about half-way up the gorge. The squadron had met such a hail of machine-gun fire from the south bank that it had not been able to get beyond this demolition.

Balck took the squadron under command and ordered it to press on along the northern bank. The tanks were ordered into the gorge, but found that the demolitions on the railway line had been so thorough

that not even the engineers could promise an immediate passage. Two officers looked for a ford over the river so that the tanks could use the road on the south bank, and by swimming and wading found a passable spot.

A Mark II tank drove determinedly down the high, steep embankment into the water. It struggled through the water like a walrus, with nothing showing except its turret ... the driver ... was sitting up to his middle in water and the waves completely prevented him from seeing anything. Finally the tank clambered out on the other side, amid loud cheers from the spectators ... now the leading five tanks crossed the river one after the other. Two missed the track and sank helplessly....

By nightfall only four tanks had crossed the river. Three of these were bogged in a swamp while trying to get round a demolition in the road, and the decision was made to halt for the night. Nothing had been seen of the British positions, but patrols found to their cost that the demolitions were covered by machine-gun fire. The Germans soon found, too, that the gorge was within range of British artillery, for scarcely had they—

... bedded down when there was a whistling through the air ... everybody jumped for cover behind, under, and in the tanks.... The detonations echoed viciously, we thought the enemy was shelling us with super-heavy guns. More and more accurately did the shells fall... repeated almost hourly until morning ... there were dead and wounded on both sides of the Pinios.

On the morning of the 18th one company from 11/304 Infantry Regiment crossed the river on kapoc floats and was immediately put to work filling in the demolition that prevented the tanks from advancing along the road to Tempe. Patrols from 8/800 Brandenburg Regiment and a platoon from this company then attacked along the road, supported by the six tanks now across the river. The squadron from 6 Mountain Division worked along the north bank. It was approximately midday, and by this time troops from 6 Mountain Division, which had, unopposed,

crossed the tortuous mountain paths of **Olympus** to Gonnos, had forced a crossing west of and behind 21 Battalion. The 3rd Panzer Regiment burst through the mouth of the gorge at **Tempe** and joined forces with 6 Mountain Division, completely cutting off 21 Battalion. Apart from delaying actions by the rest of Brigadier Allen's force, the battle for the **Pinios Gorge** was over.

Largely because of 21 Battalion's resistance between the night of the 14th and the late morning of the 16th, and the subsequent delays imposed by the skilful demolitions behind **Platamon** and in the **Pinios Gorge**—the responsibility of sapper Lieutenant Jones—Wilson's force was through **Larisa** by the time the Germans arrived early on 19 April. Seldom in war, however, were tanks forced through such difficult country, or had foot soldiers, already with over 500 kilometres' marching behind them, pushed forward so rapidly under such punishing conditions; it was a record of which any soldier could be proud. That 21 Battalion, though finally broken and dispersed, had thwarted these determined soldiers was a feat not surpassed by any British unit in **Greece**.

*Sources:* An essay on the **Balkan** campaign, by General von Greifenberg. *Mountain Troops in Greece and Crete*, a German souvenir publication.

*From Serbia to Crete*, by a publicity company of the German Army, **Athens**, 1942.

**12 Army** and **18 Corps** reports.

War diaries of **2 Panzer Division**, with appended orders and reports, **3 Panzer Regiment**,  $\frac{1}{3}$  **Panzer Regiment**, and **2 Motor Cycle Battalion**.

War diary and reports from **6 Mountain Division**.

Personal reports on German officers, German Military Documents Section, War Department, **Washington**.

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<sup>1</sup> Died of heart failure, **Alamein**, 24 October 1942.

<sup>2</sup> Dismissed September 1942 because of a difference of opinion

with **Hitler** over conduct of the Russian campaign; sentenced to life imprisonment in 1947 for war crimes in the **Balkans**.

<sup>3</sup> Rose to Army Commander; committed suicide while awaiting trial as war criminal on charges of killing hostages in the **Balkans**.

<sup>4</sup> Transferred to Reserve in 1945 and was to be discharged as 'not enthusiastically in favour' of National Socialism.

<sup>5</sup> Awarded the Knight's Cross for the Pinios action. Described as a particularly dashing and versatile commander in mobile operations: a commander above average in every respect, unshakeably cool. Committed suicide May 1945 just before American forces overran his sector.

<sup>6</sup> This operation could not be carried out owing to a heavy swell.

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# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## II: GALATAS

## *II: Galatas*

**ONE ROAD** from near the prison led up to **Galatas**, the other direct to **Canea**. Both routes were blocked and the task of opening them was beyond the resources of the paratroops in the valley. They had tried and failed after the landing on 20 May and again on the 22nd. Since then the weakened units of 3 Parachute Regiment had been on the defensive, determined to hold the prison, which was packed with their wounded. It was uncomfortably close to the front; the cottages of **Galatas** village were little more than a mile away and the enemy outposts were nearer still, well within range of Colonel Richard Heidrich's nearby headquarters.

Every day for a week it had got hotter and now, Sunday the 25th, it was stifling. Paratroops in their cumbersome uniforms were sweaty and ill at ease, and the alpine troops who had been filtering into the area for the past two days (after a gruelling fight and a rough march from **Maleme** airfield) were also feeling the heat. Two battalions of 100 Mountain Regiment, commanded by Colonel Utz, had arrived; the ship carrying the third had been sunk off **Crete** by the Royal **Navy** and only an officer and 35 men, nearly naked but still with their weapons, had so far reported in. Utz came in on Heidrich's left, and beyond him towards the sea Colonel Bernhard Ramcke was assembling the survivors of the **Assault Regiment**, which had landed at **Maleme** by glider and parachute and gained, at terrible cost, the first German toehold on **Crete**.

Major-General Julius Ringel, commander of 5 Mountain Division and in command of all troops on this front, favoured outflanking movements, but further delay was out of the question. **Galatas** had to be captured at once. Always seeking to cut down losses, this bearded, powerfully built Austrian had as his motto 'Sweat saves blood'. Here, in the sweltering approaches to **Galatas**, he could save little of either, for there was no choice but frontal assault.

Ringel had under him a capable team of officers. Utz, who had the main role in the attack on **Galatas**, was one of the best of the

mountaineers, a calm man, skilful and decisive in action and personally brave, though inclined to be shy. Of his unit commanders, Lieutenant-Colonel Max Schrank of I Battalion was tireless, confident, with sound judgment, 'far above average as a battalion commander'; Major Otto Schury of II Battalion was an ex-policeman noted for careful but energetic leadership and 'very conspicuous personal bravery'. Heidrich was a skilful tactician who had trained his paratroops well; though 'recklessly hard and severe', he was liked by his men. His unit commanders differed greatly in character but not in ability: Captain von der Heydte of I Battalion was a man of strong personality and brilliant leadership whose political sympathies held up his promotion; Major Ludwig Heilmann of III Battalion, on the other hand, was an ardent Nazi, ruthless and unscrupulous but reckless and successful in action and popular among his men. Ramcke, who had volunteered as a paratroop at the age of 51, was almost too strict and uncompromising and lost no chance of saying to his subordinates, 'I demand toughness and discipline'—demands which must have been met, for he was a successful commander. At least two of his battalion commanders, Major Stentzler and Captain Walter Gericke, were outstanding leaders. Ringel's artillery commander, Lieutenant-Colonel August Wittmann, not a strong personality, was a 'gallant and hard-working commander in action' and of firm character. The subsequent record of all these officers is impressive. <sup>1</sup>

Utz had been asked to attack the day before but had refused. It was a formidable task, calling for heavy air and artillery support and careful preparation. He knew little about the enemy except that he appeared to be strong (he had given 3 Parachute Regiment a rough handling), clever at hiding himself (his guns, effective far beyond their numbers and weight, had still not been found), and a sharpshooter, as one reporter put it, who held his fire 'like a hunter at his shooting stand until the quarry is close.' The few positions already located in this close country were well constructed and wired and resolutely defended. Two New Zealanders captured in the early morning stated that they had been short of food and water for five days, but there was little encouragement in this for

**the paratroops in the valley could say the same.**

**Whatever Utz thought of his prospects, the Germans in the valley, alpine and parachute troops alike, knew the impending attack would be hard. Their enemy came under the inclusive heading of 'Tommy' and they had grown to respect him. 'Never before', a paratroop sergeant-major, Karl Neuhoff, <sup>2</sup> remarked, had the paratroops 'run up against men who could stand and shoot and would stay to fight it out.... disciplined troops who could hold their fire until the last moment.' Of 700 men of his battalion who had landed by the prison only eighty—ten of them lightly wounded—were still in the fight. Ramcke's men in the coastal sector had been heavily counter-attacked and thrown back off a ridge they had seized the previous evening, and the morning, with its Stukas and Messerschmitts, brought them no relief from the heavy defensive fire.**

**\* \* \***

**The defenders were not picked marksmen as some of the Germans thought; most of them here were not even trained infantrymen. They were, as the Germans faced them, 19 Battalion on the right fringe of the assault; then a detachment, 180 strong, of **Divisional Cavalry**; then on **Pink Hill**, a cactus- and aloe-covered spur just south of the village and dangerously open to fire from the valley, a 'platoon' of **4 Field Regiment**, reinforced in the afternoon by another from the 19th; then the **Divisional Petrol Company** and a 'company' of **4 Field Regiment**; then A Company of 18 Battalion on **Wheat Hill**, with the rest of that unit and more gunners and drivers stretching round northwards to the coast. Two anti-tank guns of 106 Regiment, **Royal Horse Artillery**, guarded the southern entrance to the village. F Troop, **5 Field Regiment**, with four guns was to the east, and C Troop, 2/3 Australian Field Regiment, north-east. The gallant survivors of a makeshift regiment of Greeks were in and around the village, and a few light tanks of **3 Hussars**, together with the remainder of 4 and 5 Infantry Brigades, were in reserve. A few Vickers guns without tripods were manned by 27 (Machine Gun)**

**Battalion. All units were low in numbers, under-equipped and ill-fed; under almost continuous air attack nerves were ragged.**

**The attack from the valley was against Cemetery Hill on the right, which was undefended but covered with fire, Pink Hill, Wheat Hill, and the intervening approaches to the final objective, the village of Galatas. It was therefore directed chiefly against troopers, gunners, and drivers fighting as infantry. The attack along the coast was against 18 Battalion, reinforced also by gunners and drivers.**

**\* \* \***

**Ramcke, whose three weak battalions had scarcely more than the strength of one, was to attack Galatas from the north-west, Schury from the west, and Schrank from the south. Heidrich was to support Schrank with heavy weapons and make what progress he could towards Canea. As the troops moved up during the morning they were harassed by the hidden field guns, which grew increasingly troublesome, provoking a stream of complaints. Utz got impatient. Zero hour for the attack was 12.20 p.m., but Stuka attacks supposed to precede this did not take place. At 12.45 he signalled Ringel that he had started according to plan but 'When do we get Stuka support?' Half an hour later he asked again: 'Request an immediate answer whether there will be any more Stuka attacks. The battalion is waiting.' Raids would take place, he was told, at 4.30 p.m. and 4.45.**

**But the attack could not wait. A platoon of infantry guns dropped shell after shell on Cemetery Hill, thinking it harboured a mortar. Then, in the early afternoon, Schrank personally led a company onto this feature. He found it unoccupied—as Heidrich's paratroops could have told him; for both sides had found it untenable and had left it for some days in no-man's-land-but on its bald crest he came under heavy fire and still could do nothing to silence the guns.**

**Ramcke's paratroops were able to get up close under cover of a ridge outside the defences. They drove off a counter-attack in the centre**

during the afternoon, then Gericke led his men through olive groves to the spur abutting the coast. They came under heavy fire but, with good support from their own guns and mortars, they pressed on and by four o'clock gained the crest, taking fifty prisoners. The newly won positions—the first real breach in the line—were strongly counter-attacked but the paratroops held. They could now enfilade the centre of the coastal sector from the north while Schury could do the same from the south.

Schury's battalion, however, was striking trouble. It was getting more than its share of enemy shells, was raked with bullets from **Wheat Hill**, and was still not sure where the next Stuka raid would fall. The men, not wanting to get caught, were inclined to hold back.

Schrank's men had no time to think of such things. They were under fire from the olive groves south of the village and from the cactus and aloe thickets and cottages on **Pink Hill**, and they were losing heavily. **Pink Hill** had to be taken but was hard to attack. Its southern face was steep and bare and both flanks were covered with fire. Every gun within reach, directed by an aerial observer, was turned on this hill, and the Stukas, too, were called up. They came promptly but many of their bombs landed in the German lines. An alpine company working round to the left suffered badly from flanking fire. A platoon climbing up from the south was counter-attacked and driven below the crest. Hand grenades were lobbed backwards and forwards among the aloe thickets, while other defenders in the cottages on top continued their damaging fire into the valley. It was perhaps this counter-attack, straight after the bombing, which prompted an observer to write:

These hammer blows seem to affect the New Zealanders like mineral baths. Frantic, hellish fire keeps raking us whenever we raise our heads.... They even try a desperate counter-attack on the left of No. 1 Company. They want at all costs to get out from under the **Luftwaffe** without giving up the hill. So their only course is to 'withdraw' forwards. Their gallant onrush is halted by a heavy machine-gun section and an infantry gun. Our casualties are already heavy.

The success on the coast had meanwhile been used as a lever to loosen the whole of the defences on that part of the front. **Wheat Hill**, threatened from west and south and heavily bombed and shelled—its wide trenches were among the few targets visible in this dense greenery—was gradually subdued. Between there and the spur on the coast the defenders, under fire from all directions, had to run for their lives. **Ramcke Group** could see many men moving back towards **Canea** and pressed on to exploit this promising situation. On the coast road the paratroops met increasing resistance which grew solid as a rock in a matter of minutes [reinforcements to the defence here included part of 20 and 23 Battalions, a brigade band, and the **Kiwi Concert Party**], but the way inland to **Galatas** was clear. Elements of **Ramcke Group** and II Mountain Battalion, taking this route, reached the western outskirts of the village about an hour before dusk.

The line in the south, however, still held and the struggle there grew even harder. Utz threw in his last reserve, the small party of III Battalion, and called for more Stuka support. The dive-bombing tore a gap in the line, but it was quickly filled and could not be exploited. But the end was in sight. The defenders, finding Germans in the streets behind them, knew the battle was lost and began to withdraw. Alpine troops—both Schury's and Schrank's—followed up closely, but not recklessly. They were taught caution by incidents like the following, which one of them later described:

One fellow as tall as a tree climbs out of a slit trench. He has pulled two egg-shaped hand grenades. One of them explodes prematurely and takes off his left hand, but he still throws the second one to the feet of the Germans only three paces away.

With **Pink Hill** in their hands, Schrank's men gained relief from the fire that had plagued them all afternoon and they pressed on into **Galatas** from the south.

At eight o'clock, not long before dark, 100 Mountain Regiment reported that elements of II Battalion 'had penetrated into **Galatas** after

**bitter fighting and were engaged in fierce house- to-house fighting.’ Schrank's Battalion arrived shortly afterwards. Staff-Sergeant Burghartswieser of this unit, who was later decorated for this work, described his entry into the village:**

**It is getting dark as we reach the southern edge.... Paratroops and mountain troops of another company join us; we strike no opposition as far as the church.**

**Suddenly the Tommy appears in and from all streets. He is met by rifle salvos and hand grenades. We struggle to the northern outlet. Then a puzzling noise—tanks! Soon the first one rolls here, firing with everything it has... two grenade throwers on the outside of the tank, fed continuously, are especially troublesome. We are as blinded as we are stunned. The infantry shoot with all they have and we throw hand grenades until finally the tank's track is broken. In spite of this he continues to shoot and makes great gaps in the company. I cannot understand how anyone stays alive.... But worse is coming. A second tank... and infantry behind it.... We have thrown all our grenades; our ammunition is gone. I let the tank pass through and attack the following infantry, about a platoon strong. A bitter hand-to-hand fight ensues in the pitch-black night. Friend and foe are hard to distinguish....**

**In the town itself things go mad; everywhere bitter individual combats take place....**

**The story is taken up by a corporal of a machine-gun battalion:**

**... Our machine guns are one after another silenced... their crews all wounded or dead.... [the survivors] hold their positions... with grenades and pistols.... With a heavy heart the lieutenant decides to evacuate the town with his small group.... So we grasp our wounded comrades under the arms... and carefully withdraw them between the ruins of smashed houses.... Dripping with sweat, beaten and tired to death, we arrive ... at the battalion outposts. Yet even the enemy draws back; he has had enough.**



Heidrich's men were not supposed to have taken direct part in the attack on **Galatas** but some of them apparently did, for Neuhoff, speaking of this phase, said:

We were firmly convinced that this was much more than a local counter-attack; it was a general counter-offensive along the whole line which we had been expecting for some days. The appearance of tanks confirmed this view and we were quite sure that the whole battle was turning against us. The men had reached the limit of their endurance.... My commanding officer [Major Derpa] had just been killed... our morale was very low.... We were both amazed and relieved that the counter-attack, after clearing the town of **Galatas**, advanced no further, but that the enemy appeared to be retiring.

\* \* \*

The New Zealanders had not, however, been driven from the village after their counter-attack (by two companies of 23 Battalion and elements of the 18th and 20th, a patrol of 4 Mechanical Transport Company, among others, and two light tanks of **3 Hussars**) had won it back. They withdrew during the night on orders from **Divisional Headquarters** to a shorter line just to the east.

\* \* \*

Burghartswieser concluded:

In the early morning—the Tommy had disappeared—I combed through **Galatas** with my platoon and saw evidence of the night fight. The enemy had had heavy losses and we also had lost many comrades. The success honoured their sacrifice. **Galatas** was ours!

*Sources: From **Mountain Troops on Crete**, Wilhelm Limpert-Verlag, Berlin, 1942.*

*Extract from 'In the Fighting for **Crete**', an article by Kurt Neher, June 1941.*

*Personal reports on German officers.*

**Extracts from the war diary of 5 Mountain Division  
and its appendices.**

**An interview with Captain Karl Neuhoff, August  
1945, after his capture in Northern Italy.**

***Panzer Attack in Greece***



The ruined castle dominating the ridge at Platamon

**The ruined castle dominating the ridge at [Platamon](#)**

***from a German publication***

*from a German publication*



German transport driving south on the railway at Platamon. The villa is prominent also in the photograph on the right

***German publication***

**German transport driving south on the railway at [Platamon](#). The villa is prominent also in the photograph on the right**

The railway, villa, and coastline looking south from  
Platamon castle

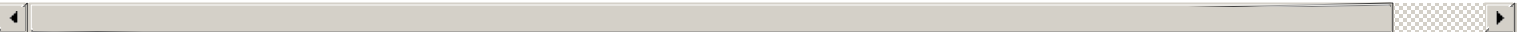


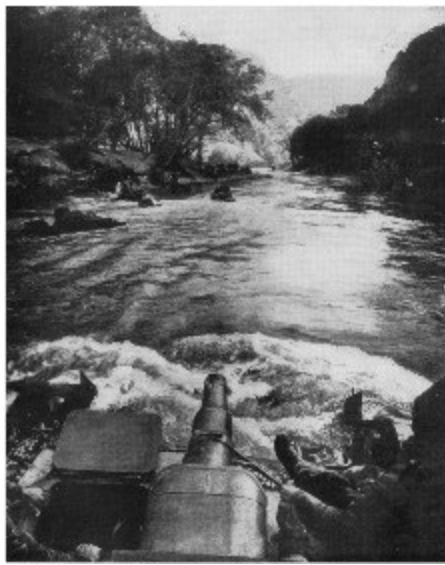
**The railway, villa, and coastline looking south from **Platamon** castle**



New Zealand positions at Platamon castle under bombard-  
ment. Mounts Ossa and Pelion are in the background

**New Zealand positions at **Platamon** castle under bombardment. Mounts Ossa and Pelion are in  
the background**





German tanks fording  
the Pinios River—the  
drivers are under water

Kriegsmarine, 1941

**German tanks fording the Pinios River—the drivers are under water**

*from German publications*



A tank followed by  
infantry with a light  
mortar and machine-gun  
forces a way through  
scrub and over boulders

**A tank followed by infantry with a light mortar and machine-gun forces a way through scrub and over boulders**



A tank blown up by a mine

**A tank blown up by a mine**



Pontoon bridge across the Pinios  
built by German engineers

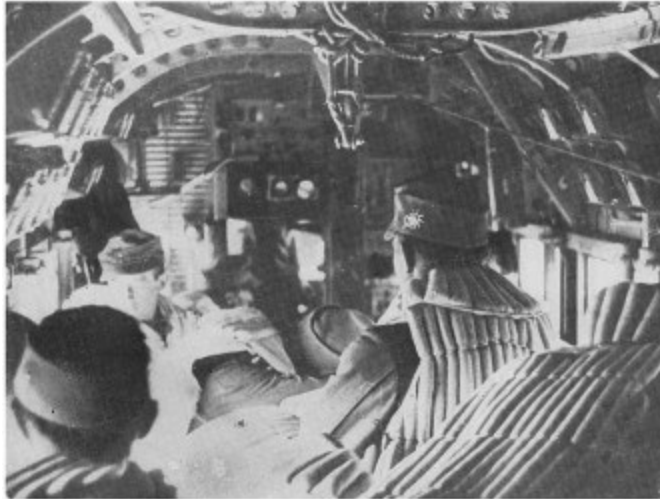
**Pontoon bridge across the Pinios built by German engineers**

The Pinios railway bridge demolished by engineers of 19 NZ Army Troops Company



**The Pinios railway bridge demolished by engineers of 19 NZ Army Troops Company**

G [ gap — reason: unclear]s



Mountain troops (note edelweiss cap badges) in a transport aircraft on the way to Crete

**Mountain troops (note edelweiss cap badges) in a transport aircraft on the way to Crete**



Ramcke's paratroops in the front with Schury's machine-gunners in action against the NZ Battalion

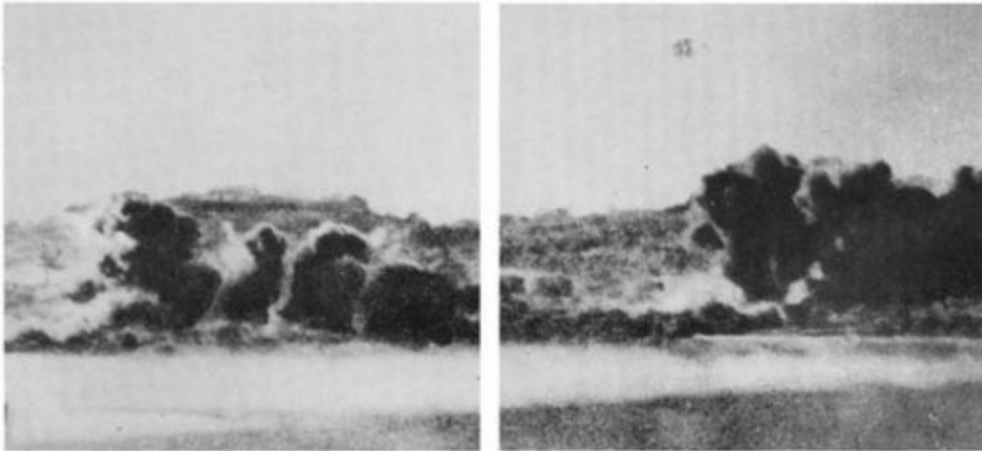
**Mountain troops moving up to the front**





Mountain troops moving up to the front

**Ramcke's paratroops in the fore [ gap — reason: unclear] with Schury's machine-gunners in action aga [ gap — reason: unclear] NZ Battalion**



Bombing south of Galatas a Germans from the prison. Pink Hill i [ gap — reason: unclear] left

**Bombing south of Galatas as se [ gap — reason: unclear] Germans from the prison. Pink Hill i [ gap — reason: unclear] left**

*from Ge [ gap — reason: unclear]lications*



Staff-Sergeant Burghartswieser makes his way into Galatas in the morning after the attack. His eye-witness account is given on pages 11 and 12

**Staff-Sergeant Burghartswieser makes his way into Galatas in the morning after the attack. His eye-witness account is given on pages 11 and 12**



Major-General Ringel, commander of 5 Mountain Division, decorating one of his officers after the capture of Crete

**Major-General Ringel, commander of 5 Mountain Division, decorating one of his officers after the capture of Crete**

***Ruweisat Ridge***

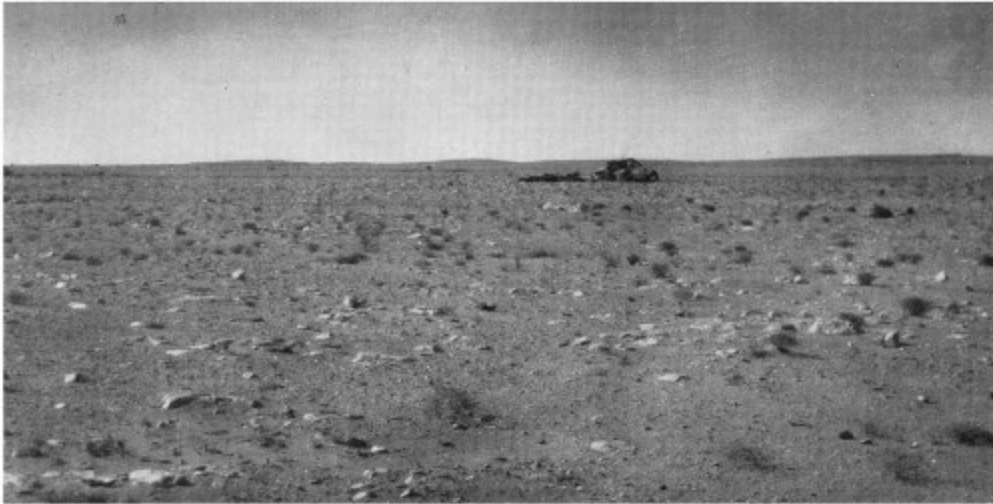




*Ruweisat  
Ridge*

New Zealand  
transport was  
bombed on the  
way forward

**New Zealand transport was bombed on the way forward**



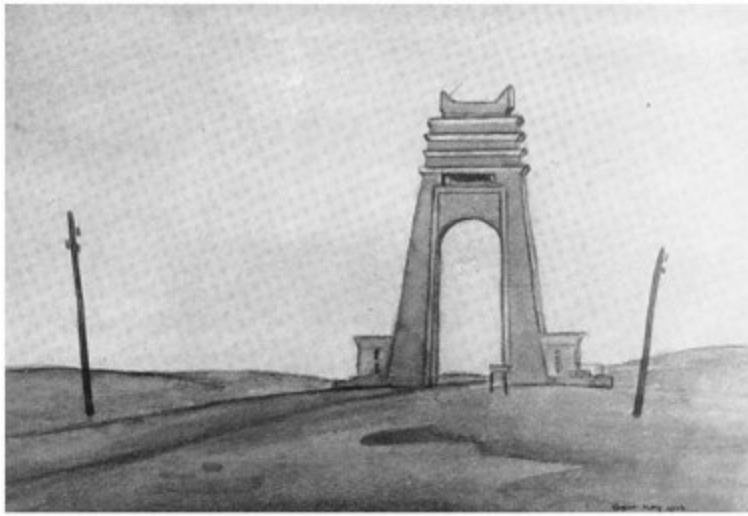
Ruweisat Ridge, September 1944

**Ruweisat Ridge, September 1944**



Field-Marshal Rommel

**Field-Marshal Rommel**



Marble Arch, straddling the Via Balbia, was built by Mussolini

**Marble Arch, straddling the Via Balbia, was built by Mussolini**

### *The Left Hook at El Agheila*



Trucks of the New Zealand Division on the move around El Aghcila

**Trucks of the New Zealand Division on the move around El Agheila**

### *Panzer Grenadiers in the Senio Bridgehead*



An overlay of aerial photographs taken of the Senio bridgehead nine days before the attack by New Zealanders and Gurkhas (see map on page 31)

**An overlay of aerial photographs taken of the **Senio** bridgehead nine days before the attack by New Zealanders and **Gurkhas** (see map on **page 31**)**



Searchlight beams create artificial moonlight

**Searchlight beams create artificial moonlight**



A New Zealand infantry post on the Via Emilia  
(Route 9) near Faenza

A New Zealand infantry post on the **Via Emilia** (Route 9) near **Faenza**

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<sup>1</sup> All of them won the Knight's Cross on **Crete**; only two failed to gain the command of at least a division. Ramcke, after commanding a brigade in North Africa, gained the highest possible award for his defence of **Brest**. Several of these officers fought the New Zealanders again either in the Desert or at **Cassino**, where Heidrich commanded 1 Parachute Division and Schrank 5 Mountain Division.

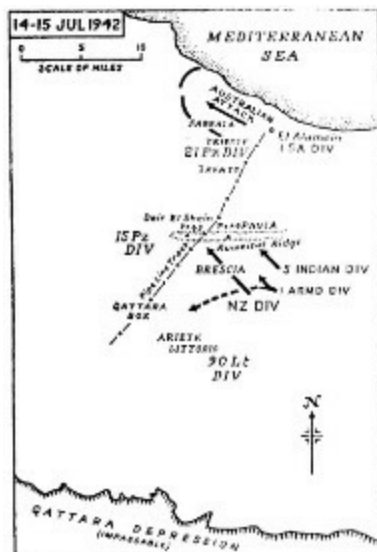
<sup>2</sup> Neuhoff also fought (as a captain) against the New Zealanders at **Cassino** and was decorated for gallantry.

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# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## III: RUWEISAT RIDGE

### III: Ruweisat Ridge



**‘WITH A VIEW to dealing them a lethal blow and removing this perpetual threat to the flank’, Field Marshal Rommel on 9 July sent a force against the New Zealanders whose aggressive action was endangering the open southern flank of his defence line. This was to be the final task for his German troops before they were withdrawn for a period of rest.**

**During the previous week, when the German-Italian army after its 400-mile advance from **Gazala** had at last been stopped by the **Eighth Army** in the narrow strip of desert between the coast at **El Alamein** and the **Qattara Depression**, Rommel had set his five Italian infantry divisions —Sabrata, **Trieste**, Trento, Pavia, and **Brescia**, in that order—to construct defences along a front stretching about fifteen miles inland from **El Alamein**. Behind this front his battle-worn armoured and motorised forces—15 and 21 Panzer Divisions, 90 Light Division, and the Italian tank formations, Ariete and Littorio—were to be re-equipped and reinforced before they resumed the thrust to the **Nile**.**

**The operation against the New Zealand Division had hardly got under way when the British attacked unexpectedly along the coast, overrunning Sabrata and part of the **Trieste** divisions. Most of the German tanks were sent hurriedly to deal with this new danger, leaving the weak mobile columns of 90 Light Division, reinforced with the infantry of **15 Panzer Division** and the Italian tanks, to continue**

operations in the south.

Between these northern and southern areas of operations Italian infantry had been steadily advancing the line of the defences. This central sector was cut at right angles by a line of low, unimposing ridges, running for some ten miles east and west and known as **Ruweisat Ridge**, which had a tactical value for both observation and cover. To the immediate south of this ridge infantry of Brescia Division were building a line of strongpoints facing to the south-east. On the ridge itself and northwards Pavia's infantry were digging in. In support of the Italians were several detachments of German field and anti-tank gunners and about thirteen tanks belonging to **15 Panzer Division**. Only the eastern tip of the ridge, where it flattened out to merge with the surrounding desert, was held by the British.

Some hours before dawn on 15 July intense rifle and machine-gun fire broke out in the central sector. At the headquarters of **15 Panzer Division** and of **Afrika Korps** some miles behind the front line, it was at first thought that the British were increasing their patrol activity to divert attention from the operations on the coast. Reports from the headquarters of the two Italian divisions, Pavia and **Brescia**, brought only the information that communications with their advanced strongpoints had been cut.

Soon Italian infantrymen came streaming back in the darkness. Then, joining in this disorderly retreat, came some of the gunners who had been manning the heavier guns well behind the front line. The rumour was spread that Brescia Division's front had been pierced and that Pavia's defences were being attacked in the rear. By this time communication with both the Italian divisions' headquarters had broken down.

While awaiting reliable information from their liaison officers attached to the Italians, the German staff still held to the opinion that a strong raiding party had broken into the defences and was trying to fight its way out again. This opinion was maintained even when



survivors of German anti-tank detachments reported in with the story that their positions had been overrun and many of their guns destroyed.

At dawn German anti-tank gunners protecting the battle headquarters of **15 Panzer Division** found themselves directly attacked. Daylight disclosed enemy troops digging in around Point 63 on the western end of **Ruweisat Ridge**, less than two miles to the east of the battle headquarters. All available men from headquarters—machine-gunners, engineers, drivers and orderlies—were immediately mustered to support a counter-attack by the four tanks of the headquarters battle group. Against heavy and accurate anti-tank and small-arms fire this counter-attack made little headway.

Then, a short distance to the south of the area of this engagement, the Panzer Division's small force of tanks appeared escorting a column of about 250 prisoners from 22 NZ Battalion. The tank commander reported that enemy infantry had fought their way through his night laager, damaging several tanks, but that as soon as it had become light enough to operate, his surviving tanks had reformed and made a quick counter-attack, to which the infantry had surrendered after their anti-tank guns had been destroyed.

Having delivered their prisoners, the tanks took up positions to the south of Point 63 to intercept the enemy force on the ridge on the line of its anticipated withdrawal. Full daylight, however, revealed that the enemy's operations had been much more than a mere diversionary raid. South of the ridge Brescia Division's defences had disintegrated except for some isolated posts that had somehow survived the night attack. Farther to the north-east Pavia Division's sector had been reduced to one strongpoint area by Point 64, on the eastern end of **Ruweisat Ridge**. From that point westwards enemy infantry appeared to be occupying the ridge. In the south-east British tanks could be seen deploying as if in preparation for an armoured thrust through the newly gained positions on the ridge.

On the north side of the ridge, where the demoralisation of the men



fleeing from the forward areas had communicated itself to those in the rear, the Italian defences were in utter confusion. Few Italian officers could be found, so that the Germans had to take over and restore discipline. But even under threats of the severest punishment only a few of the men could be persuaded to re-occupy the infantry posts and gun positions.

After the first unsuccessful counter-attack against the British force on Point 63, the Germans ordered that all possible fire power should be brought to bear on the ridge in order to force the enemy infantry to retire before their tanks could arrive. The force holding Point 63, now identified through the capture of several prisoners as part of the New Zealand Division, showed no signs of withdrawing, but at the same time the British tanks were advancing only slowly, appearing to confine their attention to those posts which, missed in the night advance, had now rallied and were putting up a spirited resistance.

In the middle of the morning **15 Panzer Division** was reinforced by 3 Reconnaissance Unit, which had hurried down from the extreme northern front. This unit, whose main strength consisted of about ten armoured cars and some captured British 25-pounders, first helped to increase the volume of fire against Point 63. When it became clear that no British tank attack was likely to come against this part of the front for some time, the unit moved to assist Pavia's surviving strongpoint, farther east along the ridge, against a threat by infantry and tanks.

No further reinforcements were received by the defenders until much later in the day. The 21st Panzer Division, still fully engaged in the north against the Australian salient, had difficulty in releasing any of its troops, but eventually sent off a small force of about one hundred men with some artillery under the command of Colonel A. Bruer.<sup>1</sup> From the area of 90 Light Division's operations in the south, **Afrika Korps** recalled the infantry force of **15 Panzer Division** commanded by Colonel E. Baade,<sup>2</sup> and also 33 Reconnaissance Unit, to reinforce the central sector. The latter unit, with a journey of nearly twenty miles over rough going from its position on the army's extreme southern flank, tried to

cut across country but ran into British tanks that had moved westwards across 90 Light Division's northern flank. The unit then had to retire some distance to the west to disengage from the tanks and only reached **15 Panzer Division's** area in the middle of the afternoon.

Colonel Baade's force, with not so far to travel, arrived even later. With the order for his recall, **Afrika Korps** had sent another order instructing 90 Light Division to disengage from the enemy on the east and to wheel northwards against the rear of the New Zealand Division. Through some confusion in these orders Baade acted on the instruction intended for 90 Light Division. While the division continued to attack to the east Baade withdrew his troops and, taking the eleven remaining tanks of Littorio under his command, wheeled to the north. Here his progress was halted by a force of British tanks backed by strong artillery fire.

Made aware of this misunderstanding by progress reports, **Afrika Korps** sent imperative messages for 90 Light Division to turn its attention to the north and for Colonel Baade to make all speed for Point 63. But by this time the British tanks had progressed westwards across Baade's front, so that he too had to make a wide detour to the west before he could reach **15 Panzer Division's** sector.

As these three groups of reinforcements—Bruer group from the north, 33 Reconnaissance Unit and Baade group from the south—were converging on the central sector, British tanks had been advancing slowly but steadily over the area to the south of **Ruweisat Ridge**. The isolated posts in **Brescia's** sector had fallen one by one, and in the middle of the afternoon an infantry attack with tank support overran the southern part of Pavia's remaining strongpoint around Point 64. The rest of this strongpoint was saved only by the vigorous action of 3 Reconnaissance Unit.

The situation was becoming grave. The British, now in clear possession of the ground to the south of the ridge, were increasing their efforts to send supplies and reinforcements to the troops holding it, and

more than fifty British tanks were reported to be deploying over a wide front. **Afrika Korps** therefore ordered an immediate counter-attack against the enemy force on Point 63 before reinforcements could reach it. As **15 Panzer Division** assembled the troops available, mostly engineers and anti-tank and machine-gunners, they were joined by **33 Reconnaissance Unit**.

With the sinking sun behind them the armoured cars of the reconnaissance unit, with the few remaining tanks of the Panzer Division, then drove east against Point 63 under a bombardment of all the available guns. Obscured by smoke and dust the armoured cars quickly broke into the defences, closely followed by the rest of the assaulting force. The defenders, infantry of **4 NZ Brigade**, offered a determined resistance for the short time that their ammunition lasted but, once their anti-tank guns were silent, were forced to surrender.

As the prisoners, about 400 in number, were being rounded up, the area came under fire from British tanks farther to the east—and also from Italian gunners on the north who had apparently failed to follow the course of the action. Under this fire and with several armoured cars and tanks damaged, the assaulting force was unable to advance past Point 63. Some of the troops on the right wing, however, had passed to the south of the defended area and penetrated some distance to the east, where they were met by the advance of a few British tanks. Falling back in some confusion, these men were halted and reformed by Bruer group which was only now moving up in support on the right flank. Still more to the south, Colonel Baade, having seen the British tanks advancing, had halted his infantry to prepare a defence line when a firm order from the Corps Commander, General Nehring,<sup>3</sup> brought him up on Bruer's right flank for a resumption of the attack.

This second wave of the assault, commencing at dusk, coincided with a withdrawal of the British tanks and carried the attack past Point 63 to subdue the final core of resistance round the headquarters area of **4 NZ Brigade**. Beyond this area the attack came under heavy artillery

and tank fire. Reduced now to fewer than a dozen armoured cars and tanks and about 200 infantry, the German force could make no more headway. As darkness fell the troops took up positions for the night along the pipeline track that ran north-eastwards from the **Qattara Box** towards **El Alamein**. By this time the tanks of **21 Panzer Division**, summoned urgently from the north, were arriving in the area to the north of the ridge.

Early in the morning of 16 July the assault was resumed with **21 Panzer Division's** assistance. Though not all the ground lost could be retaken, the most dangerous area of the British penetration, Point 63, had been won back and sufficient of the ridge could be occupied to allow the defensive line to be reformed.

For these few days the strength of the German-Italian army had been at its lowest; the men were tired, equipment was worn, supplies and reinforcements were coming forward very slowly. Italian morale was at breaking point. Only by the constant redeployment of his small German forces had Rommel managed to give his front an appearance of greater strength than it actually possessed. And this constant movement was made possible only by the ever-willing response of his battle-worn German troops to each new demand made upon their endurance.

In the accounts of the battle for **Ruweisat Ridge**, it is the two lightly armed reconnaissance units who are credited with holding off a whole British armoured corps during the day and with initiating the successful counter-attack. Although this story may not have been entirely accurate, its circulation served to restore any weakening of morale and pride among the German troops.

Of the battle the **Panzer Army** battle report recorded:

If the enemy had succeeded in capturing the Deir el Shein fortifications (a mile and a half north of Point 63), the whole **Panzer Army's** front would have been split in two.... to which **15 Panzer Division's** intelligence report added:

**It was most astonishing that the enemy could not exploit his penetration to a break-through by pushing his tanks forward....**

**Sources: Panzer Army ( Africa) battle reports.**

**15 Panzer Division's intelligence reports.**

**21 Panzer Division's battle reports and war diary.**

**90 Light Division's war diary.**

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**<sup>1</sup> Awarded Knight's Cross when acting commander of 21 Panzer Division on 22 July 1942; 'Good tactician... with special talent for organisation'; captured by the French in Tunisia in 1943.**

**<sup>2</sup> A private in 9 Uhlan Regiment in 1914, Baade rose to lieutenant-general in 1944; decorated in both wars; 'A strong personality... not always easy to handle'.**

**<sup>3</sup> Commanded Afrika Korps in the summer offensive of 1942; captured by Russians in 1945 when commanding 1 Panzer Army.**

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# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## IV: THE 'LEFT HOOK' AT EL AGHEILA

#### *IV: The 'Left Hook' at El Agheila*

**AFTER HIS** shattering defeat at **Alamein** at the beginning of November 1942, Rommel withdrew the remnants of his German-Italian. **Panzer Army** from Egypt and across **Cyrenaica** to **El Agheila**, the strongest defensive position in **Libya**, where twice previously a pursuing British force had been halted and turned back.

The El Agheila position, which blocked the route around the shore of the Gulf of **Sirte** between **Cyrenaica** and **Tripolitania**, was naturally strong: its eastern, southern, and western approaches were protected by salt marshes, soft sand, and broken ground unsuitable for manoeuvre. From **Marsa Brega**, a small anchorage east of **El Agheila**, a chain of defended localities, protected and linked together by minefields, extended inland for about forty miles to Maaten Giofer, a well on the track running southwards from **El Agheila** to the oasis of **Marada**. The western entrance to the position was a narrow pass, crossed by an anti-tank ditch and mines, between the coast and an extensive salt marsh.

The Marsa Brega-Maaten Giofer line of defended localities was occupied towards the end of November by the Italian 21 Corps ( **Pistoia**, **Spezia** and Young Fascist Divisions) and a battalion of Germans. The Italians had not been in action and according to their own commander were unaccustomed to heavy artillery fire and air attacks. In a counter-attacking role behind this thinly-held line were the motorised forces of the German Afrika Korps (15 and 21 Panzer Divisions), the German 90 Light Division, and the Italian Ariete battle group. **Afrika Korps** was reduced to about 15,000 men, of whom 4500 were supply troops, and 90 Light Division had a fighting



strength of less than 3000. The Germans had approximately fifty battleworthy tanks and the Italians about the same number.

Reinforcements could not be expected from **Europe** because all the Axis troops available were being rushed to **Tunisia** to contain the Anglo-American invasion forces in French North **Africa**. There was an acute shortage of petrol, transport, ammunition, and other supplies, largely as the result of the sinking of Axis ships in the **Mediterranean**; of the 13,000 tons of petrol despatched for the German formations in November, less than 5000 tons had arrived.

Rommel had been ordered by **Hitler** and **Mussolini** to defend the **Marsa Brega-Maaten Giofer** line at all cost, but he was convinced that a decisive battle there could end only in the destruction of his partly immobilised army. He therefore flew to **Hitler's** headquarters on 28 November and during the next four days obtained permission for the immediate withdrawal of the non-motorised infantry to **Buerat**, 250 miles west of **El Agheila**, where a new defence line was to be constructed, and to carry out a fighting withdrawal with his mobile troops if the British attacked with superior forces. Consequently the Italian 21 Corps was relieved on the nights 6-7 and 7-8 December, and the defence of the **Marsa Brega-Maaten Giofer** line was left to the predominantly German motorised formations.

After a heavy artillery bombardment, the British attacked the defended localities south of **Marsa Brega** on 12 December. Assuming that



this was the beginning of the expected offensive, Rommel pulled his German troops out of the line the following night and took up positions in the immediate vicinity of **El Agheila** and to the west. Unaware that the Germans had gone, the British shelled the abandoned positions next morning. Mines, booby traps, and demolitions impeded the troops of 51 (Highland) Division following up along the **Via Balbia** (the main road), with the result that they did not reach the **El Agheila** fort until the evening of 15 December. Farther inland 7 (British) Armoured Division advanced more rapidly and engaged the Ariete battle group in a rearguard position south of the fort on 14 December. The Italians held until nightfall despite the loss of 30 tanks (they claimed 22 British tanks), and earned Rommel's gratitude for 'their outstandingly gallant action against a much superior enemy force'.

It was at this stage that Rommel, who had been apprehensive of such a threat from the first, received warning that he was in danger of being encircled by an **Eighth Army** 'left hook'. Air reconnaissance in the late afternoon of 14 December revealed a force of at least 1500 vehicles, with tanks, moving westwards and north-westwards in the desert south of Maaten Giofer. The leading formations of the New Zealand Division,<sup>1</sup> which had gone far to the south in the hope of avoiding observation, had been discovered, but not identified, while turning the flank of the **El Agheila** position. Expecting this force to continue the move during the night and to thrust next day through Bir el Merduma (a track junction) either northwards to the **Via Balbia** or westwards to **Nofilia** (sixty miles west of **El Agheila**), Rommel ordered the withdrawal of all troops still east of the anti-tank ditch. While **21 Panzer Division** was to hold the defile just west of the ditch, **15 Panzer Division** was to occupy a defensive position on hilly ground south-east of **Marble Arch**, 90 Light Division was directed just west of **Wadi Matratin**, and the Ariete battle group was sent back to **Nofilia**. The lack of petrol not only precluded a counter-attack by the armoured divisions against the outflanking force, but made the whole situation of the **Panzer Army** appear to the German commander to be extraordinarily grave.

During the morning of 15 December the German troops holding the high ground south-east of **Marble Arch** observed the screen of British armoured cars leading the outflanking force towards Merduma. The German 33rd Reconnaissance Unit, which was patrolling the desert south-east of Merduma, came into contact with these armoured cars and was forced to withdraw its weak outposts; at that stage it was the only unit opposing the advance of the New Zealand Division. A battle group including a few tanks, guns and infantry from **21 Panzer Division**, and later the whole of **15 Panzer Division**, which had 27 tanks, was despatched to the Merduma area. The battle group, which did not arrive until mid-afternoon, saw the outflanking force passing around to the south-west of Merduma. When **15 Panzer Division** reached Merduma in the evening, the outflanking force was already west of that point.

The increasing threat to the southern flank during the morning had caused **Afrika Korps** to seek permission to withdraw **21 Panzer Division** from its rearguard position near the anti-tank ditch, but Rommel had refused this request on the ground that his petrol supply at the time would not allow him to withdraw all his formations to **Nofilia**, where he intended to make his next stand. Pressure against the rearguard became strong in the afternoon, when 7 Armoured Division attacked with tanks and infantry. Six British tanks penetrated a company position and captured twenty Germans and some vehicles, but the line was held until evening when **21 Panzer Division** was allowed to withdraw to the high ground near **Marble Arch**. The Germans claimed they had knocked out ten tanks and three guns for certain.

To avoid the threatened encirclement, Rommel decided to break contact on the night of 15–16 December and retire to **Nofilia**, a limited move for which just enough petrol had been brought forward by evening. He ordered **Afrika Korps** to withdraw **15 Panzer Division** along the desert track from Merduma and **21 Panzer Division** along the **Via Balbia**, and directed 90 Light Division to stay in the **Wadi Matratin** area as the rearguard after **Afrika Korps** had passed through. With the British outflanking force already heading towards the road, it remained to be

seen whether the German formations could get away during the night.

Towards midnight 90 Light Division, which was occupying hilly ground south of the Via Balbia at **Wadi Matratin** and had been ordered to 'prevent the enemy from operating against the road under all circumstances', heard tracked vehicles (Bren carriers leading 6 NZ Brigade Group) approaching from the south. Two or three hours later an attack (by 24 Battalion) penetrated the German positions on a hill overlooking the road, overran a battalion of 200 Panzer Grenadier Regiment, took some prisoners, and captured five anti-tank guns. <sup>2</sup> The Germans counter-attacked and reoccupied the height for a time, but came under such heavy fire from reverse slope positions that they had to withdraw again. With the help of their artillery, however, they prevented the New Zealanders from establishing themselves firmly in a position commanding the road, along which **21 Panzer Division** was retreating. Later in the morning a small German group on a hill overlooking the New Zealanders from the west was dislodged (by C Company 26 Battalion) and abandoned four anti-tank guns when it retired. Because pressure on the rearguard appeared to be increasing and **21 Panzer Division** had passed through, 90 Light Division withdrew 200 Panzer Grenadier Regiment to a position astride the road ten miles west of **Wadi Matratin**.

Meanwhile the situation farther inland, where fifty British tanks and some transport columns had been reported in the rear of **15 Panzer Division**, had caused **Afrika Korps** much anxiety. Although it had been ordered to withdraw immediately to **Nofilia**, **15 Panzer Division** had waited all night in the Merduma area for a convoy to bring sufficient petrol to take it to its objective. The corps had sent a message after midnight that 'it is absolutely essential that you push through to **Nofilia** with all possible speed, whatever happens', and at the approach of daylight had ordered the division to 'move off forthwith with what petrol you have. Petrol columns are under way... get going. Full speed.' The petrol convoy had arrived in time for 15 Panzer Division, followed by the battle group from **21 Panzer Division**, to leave shortly after daybreak.

After going about five miles this force met a unit of light tanks (New Zealand Divisional Cavalry), which withdrew westwards after exchanging a few shots. About an hour later the Germans became engaged with some tanks of 4 British Light Armoured Brigade and a large column of transport (5 NZ Brigade Group), with artillery, to the south. Although shelled by the artillery and pursued by the tanks, they passed rapidly across the front of this force and succeeded in getting away to the north-west. In this encounter **15 Panzer Division** claimed it had destroyed three tanks, two armoured cars, four guns, a tractor, and fourteen vehicles, and admitted the loss of one heavy tank, <sup>3</sup> a tractor, and ten trucks.

The pursuing British armour made **15 Panzer Division** give up its intention of holding a delaying position about fifteen miles south-east of **Nofilia**; it withdrew in one bound to the village, leaving 90 Light Division with an exposed right flank in its rearguard position west of **Wadi Matratin**. Rommel therefore ordered the latter division to make a fighting withdrawal along the **Via Balbia** if attacked by a superior force. As it was not threatened during the remainder of the day, however, 90 Light Division did not withdraw until nightfall, by which time Afrika Korps had settled into new defensive positions at **Nofilia**.

The New Zealand Division had succeeded in the evening of 15 December in getting behind the whole of the German Afrika Korps; but it had to deploy in the darkness on unknown ground, with the result that 6 Brigade, which had been sent north to block the road, had become separated from the rest of the division by a gap of about six miles. While 90 Light Division had prevented 6 Brigade from reaching the road, along which **21 Panzer Division** had retreated without interference, **15 Panzer Division** had escaped through the six-mile gap between 6 Brigade and the rest of the New Zealand Division.

‘Things are going badly in **Cyrenaica**, where the British have forced us into a disorderly retreat, making us fight under the worst tactical and logistic conditions’, wrote **Count Ciano**, **Mussolini's** son-in-law, in his

diary on 16 December. Nevertheless Rommel had succeeded in extricating all his formations, with surprisingly few casualties, from an exceptionally difficult situation.

**Sources:** Campaign Narrative of the German-Italian Panzer Army in North Africa.

War diaries of **Afrika Korps**, 15 and 21 Panzer Divisions, and 90 Light Division.

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<sup>1</sup> For this operation 2 NZ Division comprised 4 (British) Light Armoured Brigade and 5 and 6 NZ Infantry Brigade Groups, with a total of about 3000 vehicles, and was completely self-contained in supplies. In the course of the outflanking manoeuvre the division travelled nearly 350 miles over trackless desert.

<sup>2</sup> New Zealand diaries credit 24 Battalion with 34 prisoners (some of whom were recaptured later), eight 50-millimetre anti-tank guns, 25 spandau machine guns, seven cars, four trucks, and some other material. The battalion's casualties were 14 wounded.

<sup>3</sup> British diaries say that two German tanks were destroyed and that the **Royal Scots Greys** lost one. About 20 prisoners were taken from 115 Panzer Grenadier Regiment.

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# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## V: PANZER GRENADIERS IN THE SENIO BRIDGEHEAD

## *V: Panzer Grenadiers in the Senio Bridgehead*

**MAJOR-GENERAL Dr. Fritz Polack,** <sup>1</sup> commander of **29 Panzer Grenadier Division,** <sup>2</sup> felt certain by the evening of 19 December 1944 that a New Zealand attack was imminent on his **Senio** bridgehead near **Faenza**. During the previous three days the New Zealanders had been probing his defences north-west of the town in the vicinity of the **Via Emilia** (Route 9) and the high railway embankment with strong fighting patrols, mostly platoons, but in some cases of company strength. That afternoon there had been an increase in traffic up the highway from the town, but his troops were unable to report its destination. Again, the enemy's artillery had not engaged in any noticeable ranging activity that day. Air reconnaissance planes had not been over the sector since the 17th. Finally, the enemy's searchlights, previously trained towards the north-west—towards Castel Bolognese—were now directed more to the north, which seemed to indicate the direction of the expected attack.

General Polack's division had been on this part of the front for only three days. The Panzer Grenadiers had recently come out of action in the **Bologna** sector for a rest, but the acting Army Group commander, Colonel-General Heinrich-Gottfried von Vietinghoff, <sup>3</sup> had found it necessary to commit them again earlier than he had intended. The British 5th Corps divisions—the 10th Indian Infantry Division and the 2nd New Zealand Division—had made substantial gains south of the **Via Emilia**. Only by throwing in every available man had von Vietinghoff been able to form a continuous line north-west of **Faenza**. The situation in the **Faenza** area had become grave.

Polack's division took over the front formed by **26 Panzer Division** in the course of its withdrawal. His sector jutted out from the **Senio River** roughly in the shape of a wedge pointing at **Faenza**. One side of the wedge was the boundary with 278 Infantry Division, whose front ran across the ground to the immediate north of the town. On the other side were the railway embankment and the **Via Emilia**. The ground in the narrow bridgehead was typical **Romagna** country—an area of cultivated



flat ground, with irrigation ditches, rows of trellised vines, trees, and groups of farm buildings. The weather at this time was distinctly wintry. On some days there were hard frosts and weak sunshine, but mostly the days were raw and grey. There were occasional showers.

To the defence of this ground General Polack committed his 15th Panzer Grenadier Regiment, one of his three regiments of infantry. This regiment had fought the 6th NZ Infantry Brigade once before—in the heavy actions for the control of the hilltop village of **San Michele** in the New Zealand drive to **Florence** in July. The Panzer Grenadiers established their defences in the main in and around the farm houses and buildings. Digging was carried out only to a limited extent because water was close to the surface of the heavy ground. The western bank of the **Senio** had already been heavily mined to protect the Irmgard defence line along the river-front. Small minefields were laid in the bridgehead.

From the outset the Panzer Grenadier Regiment put into operation a policy of aggressive defence. The thrusts of 6 NZ Brigade's 24th and 25th Battalions up the **Via Emilia** and to and beyond the railway embankment, and of 5 NZ Brigade's 23rd Battalion and 28th (Maori) Battalion nearer the **Via Emilia** crossing of the **Senio**, were countered by carefully planned concentrations by guns, mortars and spandaus, and on occasions by Panzer Grenadier counter-thrusts, assisted by Tiger tanks. These measures made conditions difficult and unpleasant for the New Zealand battalions, and at the same time cost them casualties.

The policy of aggressive defence created—as Polack intended—an impression in the minds of the New Zealand troops that the bridgehead was strongly held. This was certainly not the case. About 700 men, including supporting tanks and guns, had been put into the bridgehead at first, but on the night of the 18th Polack, on orders from 76 Panzer Corps headquarters, with-drew





about two-thirds of his troops to the western side of the **Senio**. The bridgehead defence was left in the charge of battle outposts only, totalling in all about one battalion of Panzer Grenadiers and supporting arms (about 200 men). <sup>4</sup> Polack ordered the battle outposts to cover and screen the adoption of the new positions of the regiment, to keep up plenty of activity and vigorous fire so as to deceive the enemy into thinking that the ground was held in strength, and to make a fighting withdrawal by groups over the **Senio** if attacked by a superior force.

Most of the men withdrawn were in their new positions on the west bank of the river by the morning of the 19th. The battle outposts left behind in the bridgehead reported a quiet day. Sixth Brigade patrols which tried to test the forward positions found the Panzer Grenadiers very much alert, and were immediately brought under well-directed spandau fire. Guns and mortars supporting the outpost defence lent a hand with effective bombardments of the New Zealand positions, particularly those of 25 Battalion. The New Zealanders retained the impression that the Panzer Grenadiers were still in strength on the ground beyond the embankment.

The attack Polack had been expecting opened at nine o'clock on the night of the 19th with a heavy artillery barrage. The New Zealand Division was making a full-scale set-piece assault from the **Via Emilia** and the railway embankment with about 1600 infantrymen—three battalions of 6 Brigade and two of the 43rd Gurkha Lorried Infantry Brigade. The fire came down on most of the 6000-yard-wide stretch of

ground between the **Senio** and the **Faenza- Ravenna** railway.

The attack overlapped both the Panzer Grenadier and 278 Divisions' sectors. Eight regiments of field artillery laid down the line of creeping fire. Other field guns and about 100 medium guns sought out the bridgehead gun, mortar and headquarters positions. Heavy mortars, machine guns, and tanks assisted with diversionary and other tasks. Searchlight beams gave artificial moonlight. Red tracer shells of Bofors guns fired above the heads of the attacking infantry marked the lanes and directions of advance. The New Zealanders expected that their full-scale effort would surprise the defence. They thought it would be the cheapest way of winning the ground they wanted north of the **Via Emilia** and the railway embankment.

Polack's divisional artillery and mortars and the 76th Panzer Corps artillery acted with great promptitude. As no fire came down on them in the early stages of the attack, they were free to bring down the whole weight of their own fire on the New Zealanders. Heavy and accurate concentrations of shells and mortar bombs fell on the 6th Brigade's forming-up areas on the **Via Emilia** and the railway embankment, and on battalion areas south of the highway. The mortars caught 26 and 25 Battalions on the left and centre of the 6th Brigade front. Several men were killed; many more were wounded. Farther east, a Panzer Grenadier minefield took toll of one company of 24 Battalion, inflicting 15 casualties in one platoon. The New Zealanders' counter-battery fire against two of Polack's batteries fell on empty ground. The batteries had taken up alternative positions only an hour before the bombardment began. Even later in the night the New Zealanders' guns did not pay methodical attention to the German artillery. A thick curtain of fire came down, however, along the river line, between the new FDLs <sup>5</sup> and the outpost positions. It was concluded that the New Zealanders had laid this curtain to prevent Panzer Grenadier divisional reserves from moving into the bridgehead and to prevent the battle outposts withdrawing over the **Senio**.

For two hours the wide and deep barrage moved forward from the

vicinity of the railway embankment. The guns then turned their attention to the sectors where the attack was to be made. About 11.30 p.m. the second phase began. The wall of fire crept towards the la Palazza- **San Pietro- San Silvestro** road. The attackers came straight ahead, following close behind the advancing line of shells. To Polack's troops it seemed that certain batteries in the barrage were firing shells with no shrapnel effect, creating safe lanes in which the New Zealand infantry could come forward immediately behind the falling shells. The terrific noise made it impossible to distinguish these shells from shrapnel. <sup>6</sup> The night was so pitch black that the New Zealand rifle companies were able to penetrate the battle outpost line, closing on Panzer Grenadier company and battalion headquarters while the forward outposts were still reporting 'No sign of the enemy yet'. The heavy shellfire soon cut all the telephone lines; about midnight wireless communication also failed. From 1 a.m. it became completely impossible to co-ordinate the operations of the outposts. Each outpost group was forced to act on its own initiative in accordance with the order previously given: to make a fighting withdrawal over the **Senio** if attacked by a superior force.

For the Panzer Grenadiers it became a matter of getting back. Old soldiers, taking their weapons with them, showed remarkable skill in making their way across the enemy-held ground, through the curtain of fire along the river and the minefields to the security of the new line on the western bank. Most of these men were back in the new line by midday on the 20th. The new soldiers —recent reinforcements—did not give so good a performance. Houses and slit trenches had given good protection even against the tremendous bombardment. Losses from shellfire had not been heavy. But the morale of many of the new men had been smashed. These were the men who did not return. General Polack thought they should have done better:

If the enemy penetrates the positions or breaks through, there are always opportunities for men to get back from enemy-occupied territory next day or next night. In the daylight a situation is never so hopeless

as it seems at night.

About 2 a.m. the New Zealanders had closed up to their objectives towards the east bank of the **Senio** and along the road running south-east from la Palazza. The Gurkhas were further down the road in the **San Silvestro** area. The barrage ended. The attack was over. The New Zealand casualties totalled 120, most of which had been suffered when the battalions had been caught by Polack's mortars on their start lines. German prisoners totalled 180, but of this number only 86 were recorded by the New Zealanders as belonging to 15 Panzer Grenadier Regiment. The rest, it would appear, came from the neighbouring 278 Infantry Division.

To Polack the whole operation was a most satisfactory success for his 15th Panzer Grenadiers. Their aggressive defence had deceived the New Zealanders into making a major attack,<sup>7</sup> using strong forces of infantry and wasting an enormous amount of ammunition—about 100,000 rounds.<sup>8</sup> Yet only about one battalion of Panzer Grenadiers was engaged. Taken by and large, the New Zealand thrust was wasted. On the morning of 20 December Polack found that his casualties and losses were fewer than ever before, and that his regiment—and the division—remained largely intact. Above all, valuable time had been gained by his division to perfect the plans for its further defence.

The Senio line remained secure until **Eighth Army's** final offensive in April 1945.

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<sup>1</sup> This officer joined the German Army as an officer cadet in 1911, fought on the Western Front, and on **Gallipoli** with the Turkish Army. Discharged from the Army in 1920, he gained a doctorate in political economy and finally became a partner in a printing firm. In 1934 he rejoined the Army as a supplementary officer, transferring to the active list about two years later. In 1943 he was awarded the Knight's Cross as leader of a battle group in **Sicily**. He was promoted lieutenant-general in March 1945. His superiors' reports stated he was an excellent leader and an outstanding artilleryman.

<sup>2</sup> The division took part in the campaigns in **Poland** and **France**, and in 1941 went to **Russia** where it was virtually destroyed at **Stalingrad** in January 1943. It was reformed and then went to the Italian theatre, where it fought in various operations until the surrender on 2 May 1945. Its full strength was 12,000 men, and it ended the war with a strength of 5400. The division was known as the 'Falken'(falcon) Division, and was cited three times for distinguished action.

<sup>3</sup> Acting in the place of Field Marshal Kesselring, who had been seriously injured when his car was involved in an accident on 23 October. Subsequently, as German Commander-in-Chief, von Vietinghoff negotiated the surrender of all German forces in **Italy**.

<sup>4</sup> When interviewed in August 1945 Polack said there were 120 men of the Division on the south bank of the **Senio** after the withdrawal. [This number probably does not include supporting arms.]

<sup>5</sup> Forward Defended Localities.

<sup>6</sup> As far as can be ascertained only ordinary HE shells were used in the barrage. The second phase actually followed an arranged pause.

<sup>7</sup> The New Zealanders knew that there had been a withdrawal by troops of 278 Infantry Division from the northern outskirts of **Faenza**, but up to the moment of the attack they did not really know whether 15 Panzer Grenadier Regiment 'was falling back now or not, but at any rate it was too late to do anything'.

<sup>8</sup> 'We counted 94,000 shells in three and a half hours', Polack later told a New Zealand officer. In point of fact, the Allied artillery could ill afford to expend large quantities of ammunition at this time.

The German sources used are:

**‘29 Panzer Grenadier Division Report on Fighting on the Italian Front, 16-20 December 1944’, incorporated in a pamphlet entitled ‘Preparations for Defensive Campaign in 1945’ issued by the Commander-in-Chief, South-West.**

**Daily reports of Commander-in-Chief, South-West, to OKH (High Command of the German Army), December 1944.**

**‘29 Panzer Grenadier Division in [Italy](#)—GOC's reminiscences.’ (Recorded by a New Zealand Archives officer.)  
War diary of [10 Army](#).**

**Personal reports on German officers.**

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NEW ZEALAND IN THE SECOND WORLD WAR  
Of and by



Special Service  
in Greece

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Special Service in Greece

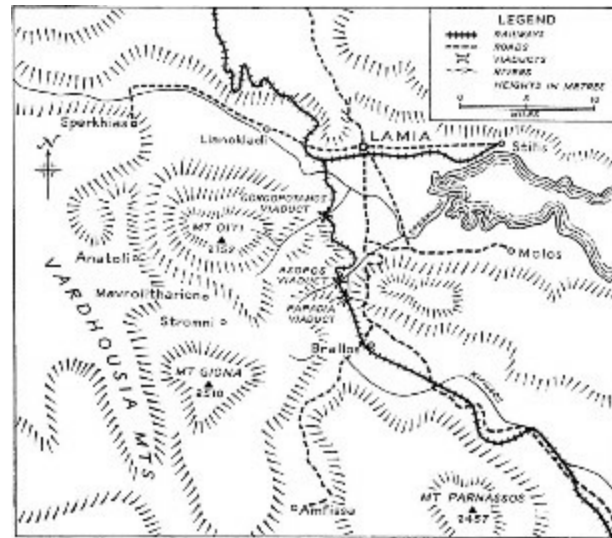
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# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## [FRONTISPIECE]



The operation area with the location of the Gorgopotamos and Asopos viaducts

**The operation area with the location of the Gorgopotamos and Asopos viaducts**

**EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2**

**[TITLE PAGE]**

**Special Service in Greece**

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**WAR HISTORY BRANCH**

**DEPARTMENT OF INTERNAL AFFAIRS WELLINGTON, NEW ZEALAND**

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# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

[EDITORPAGE]

**WHEN** *Captain Upham and I were in Athens in April 1952 as the New Zealand representatives at the unveiling and dedication of the Memorial erected by the Greek people to soldiers of the British Commonwealth who died in Greece, we found that our men had left a very great reputation. Queen Frederika said to me: 'The Greek people think your soldiers were all gentlemen. They were brave and kind.' This reputation was earned by the New Zealand Division, which fought with high credit in the brief campaign of 1941, by the men who escaped after capture then or in Crete, and who wandered for months or years before getting back to Egypt, being recaptured or perishing, and by the volunteers who returned to Greece on desperately hazardous 'Special Service'. It is a great satisfaction to put on record the services of some of these brave soldiers.*

*New Zealand should be grateful to the Greek people who helped and sheltered her men regardless of the deadly penalties they risked.*

**H. K. KIPPENBERGER**

,  
**Major-General**  
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

NEW ZEALAND WAR HISTORIES

# EPIISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## GORGOPOTAMOS VIADUCT

## **GORGOPOTAMOS VIADUCT**

**IN September 1942 Colonel F. M. H. Hanson, <sup>1</sup> Chief Engineer **2 NZEF**, sent for Captains C. E. Barnes <sup>2</sup> and A. Edmonds <sup>3</sup> and, interviewing them separately, told them that General Sir Harold Alexander, GOC-in-C **Middle East**, wanted two sapper officers from the New Zealand Division to join a sabotage party in blowing up an important railway viaduct in **Greece**. The saboteurs were to drop by parachute, meet pro-allied Greeks, and with their help destroy the viaduct. They were to be well supplied with explosives and arms but for food and other necessities were expected to live off the country. Little was known of conditions inside **Greece** apart from the fact that the Germans and Italians were hated and that any British party there could expect the sympathy, if not the active help, of the Greeks. The work of the party was to be confined to this single operation, and as soon as it was finished every endeavour was to be made to get the men away again. No definite promises could be made, and if there was a slip-up in the plans the party would have to stay in hiding for as long as possible, even until the liberation of **Greece**. Colonel Hanson said it was up to the two officers to say yes or no; the task was dangerous and was outside the accepted hazards of a soldier's life. There was to be no compulsion at all. If they declined nothing more would be said or heard about it, as **General Freyberg** and himself were the only persons in the Division who knew about the proposed operation. Barnes said yes, as did Edmonds.**

**Early next day Major C. M. Woodhouse, an English officer who already had worked in occupied **Greece**, called on the two sapper officers and took them to the headquarters organising the proposed operation. There they met Brigadier Keeble who was commander of what the special service agents called 'The Firm'; all secret Allied activity in the enemy-occupied **Balkans** was directed from here. Keeble stressed, first of all, there there was no time to lose and that the demolition—given the code-name of **HARLING**—was to be done quickly, otherwise it would be of no benefit. He went on to describe the general purpose of the operation. A main supply route of the Axis was the single-track railway down the**

centre of **Greece** to the port of **Piraeus**, from where supplies for North Africa were either shipped or flown by way of **Crete** to **Tobruk** and **Benghazi**. At this time, late 1942, all of **Europe** and most of North Africa were controlled by the enemy, and although the **Eighth Army** in Egypt was building up for the offensive at **Alamein**, the war was by no means going in the Allies' favour. Keeble told the two New Zealanders that General Alexander considered that if the Greek railway line was put out of commission for a few weeks, Rommel would be badly hit by lack of supplies; and with the Germans so weakened, the **Eighth Army's** attack at **Alamein** would have a much greater chance of success. The GOC-in-C had attached so much importance to this operation that he had directed that it be given priority over all others.

Keeble then gave details of the proposed operation. The target was one of three railway viaducts in the **Brallos Pass** area, namely Gorgopotamos, Asopos and Papadia. He said that he would like to see Asopos destroyed: this viaduct, a huge structure spanning a deep gorge, was one of the most spectacular on the Greek railway and would take several weeks to rebuild. However, the choice of the viaduct was to be left to the leader of the party. Barnes and Edmonds were given plans of the viaducts and were asked to estimate what explosives would be required.

Both officers were rushed through the normal three weeks' parachute course in two days. The commander of **HARLING**, Colonel E. Myers of the **Royal Engineers**, joined them at the school. The sabotage party was divided into three teams of four men, consisting of a leader, an interpreter, a sapper and a wireless operator. For greater security the men were given code-names, their Christian names or nicknames usually being used. Three planes were to carry the teams with their quotas of stores, explosives, arms, ammunition and wireless sets. On the first plane were Colonel Eddie Myers as the leader of both a team and of the whole party; the interpreter was Captain Denys Hamson, the sapper was Captain Tom Barnes and the wireless operator was Sergeant Len Wilmot. The team on the second plane, in the same order as the first,

were Major Chris Woodhouse, Captain Themie Marines, Captain Inder Gill and Sergeant Doug Phillips. The third plane carried Major John Cook, Captain Nat Barker, Captain Arthur Edmonds and Sergeant Mike Chittis. Barnes and Edmonds were the only New Zealanders.

### *Parachute Landing*

On the night of 28 September 1942 the aircraft left Egypt and headed for Greece. They flew high to keep out of trouble, but when central Greece was reached they came in low over the target area. The planes hovered around looking for the signal fires; they skimmed the hilltops and flew through the valleys but nowhere below were the expected signals. Two hours were so spent, flying forwards and backwards; to delay any longer would expose the aircraft to daylight attack on their return journey, so they returned to Egypt. The men were tired and dejected and were glad to hear that they were to have two days' rest before the next attempt. A few years later Edmonds found out why there were no signal fires that night. In Athens he met Professor Seferiadis, a Greek special service agent who was supposed to have received the sabotage party. Seferiadis told him that he had been arrested while on his way to the dropping area and had not been able to get word back in time for another agent to take his place.

The planes set off again for Greece on 30 September. On this trip Woodhouse and Cook switched leadership of parties, but apart from this there was no other change. If no flares were seen, the men were instructed to land on any spot in the area suitable for jumping. They were then to collect as quickly as possible.

The plane Edmonds was in reached Mount Giona and after a few sweeps picked up the light from three fires grouped in a small basin. Although it was not the expected signal the men jumped. They all landed away from the fires and, after hiding their parachutes and flying kit, cautiously edged their way to the fires. There they found a Greek lieutenant, a Cypriot soldier and a young lad from the nearby village. These three had heard the aircraft on the first fruitless flight and on the



second night had lit fires in the hope that something—food, ammunition, anything at all— would be dropped; but they had not expected men. They all huddled around the fire until dawn when they collected the stores containers. The first big disappointment was to find the wireless smashed. Once all the stores were accounted for they had a closer look at the country and wondered how they had missed injury in landing on such mountainous terrain. The young lad, Andreas, took them to a nearby cave, perfectly concealed, where they settled in. The day wore on but still there was no sign of the other parties.

Later in the day the leader, Woodhouse, went off with Andreas to Amfissa, an Italian garrison town not far away, where he intended to make a reconnaissance and, if possible, send a runner to Athens with a message to an agent who would forward it to Cairo on one of the secret transmitting sets known to be there. Edmonds and the others cleaned the gear and stored it in the cave. The cave itself was not pleasant to live in and the men moved out to an open camp, where the parachutes were used as blankets and shelter. Another Cypriot, a cousin of the other, joined the party.

There was nothing to do now but wait until Woodhouse came back. The days dragged by slowly and there was still no word of the other two parties. Then on the seventh day they heard that a British party was on its way to the camp; the news was like a tonic after a week of seclusion and enforced inactivity. In the afternoon Hamson and Wilmot arrived and all gathered around eager to know what had happened to them. Like Woodhouse's party, they had jumped over fires in a densely wooded valley but had had to wait until dawn before they could come together. The country was very broken and the stores containers fell over a wide area. People from the local village were out early collecting the stores: they looked upon them as booty and refused to give them up. Some of the containers were returned later, mostly the explosives. A few of the village children ate the explosives thinking they were sweets and became very sick. The area was not safe, and when Italian troops came looking for the parachutists they moved on. Before doing so they buried

all the gear they had managed to salvage. Their wireless set, like Woodhouse's, had been badly damaged in the drop.

The leader of a small band of brigands, Karalivanos, who had attached himself to Myers' party, was introduced. A short, strongly built man, with a heavy black beard, Karalivanos was dressed in Greek national costume and had the appearance of an apparition from a bygone age. His jacket was heavily embroidered, he wore knee breeches and stockings, and even his shoes had the traditional black pom-poms. The finishing touches were added by the armoury he had wrapped around his body—grenades, pistols, ammunition and knives—and by the rows of medals on his chest.

With the exception of Woodhouse who was still away on reconnaissance, the two parties now joined up. The men had hardly settled in to their new camp when they were startled by an old man bursting in on them. 'We heard the rattle of stones on the slope above us and like a whirlwind a vigorous old man came into our camp, talking Greek with great speed and volume. Then suddenly the Greek stopped and he staggered us by saying with a marked American accent, "How are you, okay." "This newcomer hopped excitedly around the camp and never stopped talking for a moment. He was Nikos Beis from Lithoriki, a village about eight hours to the south, and when he had heard of the British party he had come to see if he could help. A rifle rested in the crook of his arm and the pockets of his ragged coat bulged with ammunition. A civilian cap was pulled well down on his head; he wore an old-fashioned pair of military breeches with puttees wound around his legs from the knees to just above the ankles, and his low shoes left the top part of his feet exposed. As a young man he had spent ten years in **America**, but he had returned in 1912 to fight against the Bulgars and had never left **Greece** again. The men liked the old man from the start and even more so as the days went by. Baba 'Uncle' Niko, as he was affectionately called, gathered food and cooked for them, his advice on the country and the people was always reliable, and he wanted nothing for himself but to see the party strike a blow against the hated enemy.

**Edmonds, in one of his subsequent reports, said that the party looked upon Baba Niko as its saviour and that, without his help, it could easily have failed in its objective.**

**Niko had a very poor opinion of Karalivanos and went to no trouble to hide it. At the time Karalivanos was sulking, and it was plain to everyone that his attachment to the party was purely for what he could get out of it. When he saw that there was no hope of free goods, he stopped helping in the work of the camp and became more and more obstructive. Niko exploded with wrath when he heard Karalivanos saying that there were no mules in the locality. 'Mules,' he said, 'Why, there are plenty. I'll get as many as you want.' He left the camp immediately and promised to be back in a few days with a whole team.**

**Woodhouse came back from Amfissa and shortly afterwards, on 9 October, there was an air drop of supplies. The high wind scattered these over a wide area. Karalivanos and his men went to work with a will but their eagerness slackened off when they found they were collecting explosives, not food. The noise of the planes brought Italian troops to the locality searching for parachutists and also questioning the villagers. With the idea of collecting the stores left behind, Karalivanos tried to panic the party into leaving, but Myers had the measure of the man and refused to be rushed. The Italians kept within range of the villages and did not venture too far into the mountains.**

**Baba Niko returned proudly leading a string of fifteen mules. 'And,' he said, 'there will be fifteen more along in the morning.' At dawn next day he started out with the first section of the party for a place he knew which was much more secure than the present one; a few hours later the second section followed with the rest of the mules. Myers and Woodhouse remained to await the arrival of the second team of mules. All this activity was maddening to Karalivanos as he sullenly stood by, thinking of what he could have purloined and how he had missed. He called his band together and they all walked away—a good riddance, everyone thought. But they had not finished with brigands. Another one, Barfas, arrived about this time and was taken into the party; he seemed**

**to be a better type and more reliable than his predecessor.**

**The journey through the mountains was hard. The guides kept away from villages, making wide detours through the wild country. There was no let-up in the steady, yet exhausting, pace of the guides as they plunged down into valleys and climbed up steep hillsides. Heavy mist covered the mountains, and it was only by calling out that the parties managed to reassemble in the afternoon. Another recruit was added to the party when Baba Niko introduced Mikhali Khouri, a Palestinian Arab soldier, who had been left behind in Greece and who had been in hiding ever since. He was a well-built man of about 28. His beard was beautifully trimmed and his hair long; and he wore, at a jaunty angle, a red Evzone cap with a long tassel. On each shoulder of his khaki jacket he had a big silver star, and wrapped around him was an array of bandoliers, knives and grenades. A well-kept tommy gun was slung on his back and he carried a shepherd's crook. He spoke very broken English but this was no hindrance to his volubility. He boasted shamelessly of his exploits but did it in such a good-natured way that it was almost refreshing. After he had been sized up he was accepted into the party. Khouri became a valued special service agent and his worth was recognised by the award of the MM and later by a bar to the same decoration.**

**Khouri left almost immediately to search for food. It snowed heavily in the night, and next morning the party continued its journey in the cold and mist. When Khouri joined the party again, the men noticed that he had taken the silver stars off his shoulders and had placed three chevrons on his arm. His real rank was private, but evidently he felt that he owed it to his numerous Greek friends to hold on to some pretence of rank.**

**The new camp was on the opposite side of Mount Giona, near the village of Mavrolitharion. Myers was specially anxious to find out if there were guerrillas fighting in the mountains and, if so, where. But the local Greeks did not know of any. It looked as if the party would have to**

recruit its own supporting force from the nearby villages. In the meantime there was plenty of work to be done on the stores. Everyone helped in cleaning and checking the arms and explosives. Barnes and Edmonds supervised the handling of the explosives and began breaking them down to more convenient sizes. Each day was fully taken up in these tasks.

Work was forgotten when a messenger from Stromni, the nearest village, came running up to warn them that three hundred Italians were at a place not three hours away looking for the party. The men watched the flat below and saw the Italians approaching and then pitching camp. It was dangerous to stay. Baba Niko again came to the rescue; he knew of an excellent hiding place about an hour away. Before moving, the party hid the stores and explosives near the cave and covered up all tell-tale signs of habitation. Sidling along the north-west slope of Giona, they could see that the Italians had thrown a cordon around the mountain. The new hiding place was a grass-covered ledge perched high on the mountainside and aptly called 'The Eagle's Nest'.

### *Reconnaissance*

Myers, Hamson and Yianni, of Stromni village, left immediately on a reconnaissance of the three viaducts. They moved at night and during the day were in well-concealed positions with a good view of the country. From the start they used code-names of their own making for the viaducts so as not to give an inkling of their intentions to the Greeks around them. Papadia was known as 'The Priest One', Gorgopotamos as 'The George One', and Asopos as 'The Soapy One'.

Of all the countries in **Europe**, with the possible exception of **Albania**, **Greece** was the least well supplied with railways. The main railway line, a single track, ran down the centre of **Greece** from Plati to **Piraeus**, a distance of some 300 miles. In pre-war days the famous Orient express did the trip in about eleven hours, while the ordinary passenger express took three hours longer. The line had to cross three great east-to-west ranges, and to overcome the difficulties of the terrain it was

steeply graded and tortuous. Any high speed was impossible and the carrying capacity was low. The sabotage party was in the Oiti Mountains where the line was to be cut. From the plains to the south the train climbed the Oiti Range at a gradient of 1 in 50 up to the **Brallos** tunnel, by which the Kifissos-Sperkhios watershed was crossed. From the tunnel the train descended the steep and twisting Asopos Gorge, through many tunnels and over spectacular viaducts until it reached the narrow plain of Sperkhios. It was on this stretch that the three big viaducts were situated. At this time the line was working to full capacity carrying military supplies south.

Within a few days Myers returned, and to an intent audience related his observations. Asopos viaduct was in extremely difficult and precipitous country. It was perched over a sheer gorge with tunnels at either end and there was no easy access; it also had a strong garrison and reinforcements were not far off. A surprise attack was out of the question, and altogether the prospects for a quick and successful demolition by a small force were poor. Papadia viaduct was near Asopos, but the approaches to it were too wide and there was no cover for a force to creep up to a convenient attacking place. It was heavily garrisoned and had quick communication with reinforcements in the neighbourhood. Gorgopotamos viaduct, eight miles north of Asopos, looked the best proposition of the lot. There was good access sufficiently open and yet well enough covered to allow an attacking force to operate. Likewise the line of retreat was quick. The nearest reinforcement was at Lianokladi, several miles to the north, while the Papadia and Asopos garrisons were even farther away to the south. There were about eighty men in the Gorgopotamos garrison and it was likely that, despite the fortified defences, a small force could capture the viaduct in a surprise attack. Gorgopotamos viaduct became the target.

Myers conferred with Barnes and Edmonds, gave them technical details of the viaduct, and placed Barnes in charge of the demolition party. Barnes estimated the stock of explosives at five hundred pounds and calculated that it would be enough for the task, allowing a very

generous safety margin. \* One of the wireless batteries picked up sufficiently for the men to hear faintly that the Battle of **Alamein** was in progress. The news added to their impatience to get the job done quickly. They had been told, however, that if one of the viaducts was destroyed within two months their object would have been achieved.

News arrived that Colonel Zervas, a well-known Greek officer, was leading a band of guerrillas in the Valtos region on the west side of the **Pindus Mountains**. Woodhouse, a tireless walker, set off on 2 November to find him. It was understood that if he was not back in sixteen days, the party would attempt the attack with whatever men they could recruit in the locality.

The two sapper officers studied a blueprint of the Gorgopotamos viaduct and also a photograph showing the Orient express crossing it. In length it was 674 feet and it stood 105 feet above the river. It consisted of seven steel spans supported by four stone and two steel piers. Barnes and Edmonds decided to cut the higher of the two steel piers near its base and so bring down two of the spans. By cutting a section out of one side of this pier, the spans would fall to one side and become twisted so much out of shape that it would be impossible to use them again. If there was enough time the second steel pier would also be cut. Barnes set the party a rigorous preparation and training schedule. The explosives were made malleable and converted into smaller sizes. This was a long and tedious job at which everybody took a turn. Finally the explosives were tied to boards for better carrying and handling. From a farmer who knew the viaduct it was learned that the steel legs of the pier were in L-shaped sections. A dummy pier leg was fashioned

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\* Lt-Col Edmonds comments: 'Invariably when planning a demolition we calculated the minimum charges required, then, reckoning that once we reached the target we must be certain there were no hitches, we would double the charge to allow for them being faultily placed in the haste of the operation. If explosive was available we might even double up on those charges.'



**‘When lecturing the Haifa sabotage school on this operation later, I staggered them by telling them the quantity we used. The same result could have been achieved with one-tenth of the total charge, but of course we were in the dark as to the size of bridge members until we reached the target.’**

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**out of wood and by day and night the men practised tying charges to it. They prepared themselves for anything unusual that might arise, and so skilled did they become that Barnes considered that if everything went according to plan the pier could be demolished in ten minutes.**

**There were rumours of another British party somewhere in the mountains but they were not definite enough to identify it as that led by Cook. To the surprise and joy of all, on 14 November Cook and his three men walked into the camp. Apart from the company, four more men were a welcome addition to the little sabotage party. But even more welcome was the news that Cook had got in touch with a band of guerrillas led by one Ares and had been escorted on the way by them. On the night that the others had parachuted into Greece, Cook could not find a good dropping place and was forced to return to Egypt. After two more unsuccessful attempts, his party jumped on fires on the outskirts of Karpenissi which, unknown to them, was a heavily garrisoned town. The Italians opened fire on them in the air but fortunately all landed safely. Three came down on a hill to the east of the town and were immediately surrounded by soldiers. They hid for a while until the search slackened, then cautiously made their way into the security of the more distant hills. The other man landed right in the middle of the town and was immediately hidden by the townspeople. When the excitement had died down, the Greeks conducted the men to the guerrilla leader, Ares.**

**The guerrillas—or Andartes, to give them their Greek name—who had come with Cook stood in groups around the camp. Their ages ranged from 18 to 35; they were strongly built and nearly all were bearded. They were poorly dressed in a collection of old and ragged uniforms and many were barefooted. Their arms were an assortment of all types of rifles,**



though a few carried captured **Breda** machine guns.

On 17 November Woodhouse came back with more good news. He had reached Valtos in the record time of six days and without difficulty had found Zervas and his band of Andartes. At the time Zervas had an Italian battalion bottled up in a narrow gorge and was picking them off until the inevitable arrival of reinforcements would force him to withdraw. So keen was he to help the British party that he called the action off, and after selecting forty-five of his best men, left immediately for Mavrolitharion which, by forced marches, was reached in eight days. On his Valtos journey Woodhouse heard of a British party staying with a guerrilla band and, as he had expected, found Cook and the three others. He vouched for them to the leader, Ares, who had been somewhat suspicious of them, and also induced him and his band of eighty to join the intended operation.

Colonel Zervas, who had accompanied Woodhouse, was introduced. He was then over fifty years old, was of short build and inclined to stoutness; his beard was long and like his hair, already greying, was well groomed. He wore a clean and well-kept khaki uniform and also a small cap of the same colour. In manner he was calm and assured and instinctively he commanded the respect of all who met him. Zervas was well known in **Greece** and, like so many Greeks, had had an up-and-down career in politics. A member of the regular army, he went over to the Venizelos revolutionary government in 1916 and had advanced rapidly in the Venizelist army. Closely involved in the quickly changing political life of the times, he took part in the revolt that overthrew General Pangalos and his dictatorship in 1926. His political fortunes slumped thereafter and he was forced to retire from the army. Out of politics he switched to the whirl of social life in **Athens** and established for himself a reputation as a playboy and gambler. After the German invasion he joined a newly formed republican party called the Greek Democratic National League—better known by its Greek initials of EDES—and was selected to lead a guerrilla band under its sponsorship. In June 1942 he started recruiting followers in western **Greece**, his birthplace, and soon

he had a sizeable force carrying out raids on the enemy.

On the way to Mavrolitharion where Ares and his guerrillas were billeted, the British party was given a great ovation by the villagers and had their first sight of Ares. He was poles apart from Zervas. Short and of slight build, \* everything he did—moving and talking—was done quickly and spiritedly. His nose was small and hooked and his eyes sharp and brown. In keeping with the guerrilla fashion, he had a black, bushy beard. From his wrist hung a vicious looking leather whip. He described himself as a schoolteacher and it was easily seen that he was well educated and also very intelligent. At this meeting Ares was pleasant but the men soon found out his real nature. He was cold-hearted and cruel and, in the manner of a fanatic, was ruthless to anybody who stood in his way. He was a sadist and delighted in horrible forms of torturing and killing his victims. He was reputed to be a homosexual and to have served prison sentences for these offences.

Ares joined the Communist party in the pre-war days and went to **Russia** for training; it was reported that he had fought in the Spanish Civil War. Nobody was ever sure of his real name though the most commonly accepted version was Athanassios Clarass. His birthplace was given as **Lamia**. Ares was backed by an organisation of several parties of the Left called the National Liberation Front—better known to the Greeks and the outside world by the initials EAM. The real power of the organisation was in the hands of the Communist party, though this party went to great pains to conceal its control. By 1942 EAM had an efficient political organisation operating over most of central **Greece** and in that year it formed a military force, giving it the name of the National People's Liberation Army—the initials this time were ELAS. Ares was chosen as the leader, and as such was one of the personalities who shaped the history of **Greece** during the war and the years immediately following. He was killed in 1945 in a fight with Government forces. His head was cut off, impaled on a stake, and set up in the village square of **Trikkala**.

The two guerrilla leaders agreed to combine for the attack on the

viaduct and Zervas was placed in charge. This was the first time the two had ever met, and it was the only time during the whole occupation that they combined in a common action. Zervas and Ares sent their men to reconnoitre the viaduct, and when they came back Myers worked out plans for the final assault.

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\* Edmonds comments that Ares 'filled out amazingly during the next two years when he wore out saddles instead of boots.'

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### *Assembly Point and Attack*

The attack on the garrison was to be by night, and if possible by surprise. Two parties of eight Andartes each were to cut the railway and telephone lines and were to remain to cover the demolition and hold up reinforcements until the withdrawal signal, a green Very light, was given. The main force of a hundred men was to attack at 11 p.m. on 25 November. Mikhali Myridakis, a regular artillery officer and second-in-command to Zervas, was to lead a party of eighty against the main garrison, while another party of twenty was assigned to deal with the northern defences. The demolition party was split into three teams of four men, each under one of the sapper officers, Barnes, Edmonds and Gill. Another party of three under Hamson was to assist as required. The demolition party was to wait five hundred yards upstream from the viaduct until the signal—a white light from the north bank and a red one from the south—was received that the garrison had been eliminated. Headquarters was to be set up on the north bank with Zervas in charge, and Myers and Woodhouse were to remain there.

The move to the Gorgopotamos viaduct began on 24 November. The whole force, with the exception of Ares and a few of his men, moved off that morning for the assembly point on top of Mount Oiti. Ares had a reason for delaying his march as the men found out later from Barker, who had stayed with him. A man from a neighbouring village was accused of sheep stealing and Ares summoned all the villagers to the

square to witness the trial. In villages to which Ares had access, he had dissolved the civil police and had undertaken to maintain law and order himself. Ares thrashed the man mercilessly with his leather whip until he was forced to confess. Ares then drew his pistol and shot him through the head. He told the people that was how he dealt with wrongdoers.

The trudge up the mountain was exhausting and Edmonds marvelled at the way Zervas, singing jazzy songs, led his men through the falling snow. The weather worsened and by the time they reached the top at four in the afternoon there was a howling blizzard. The soldiers were glad to creep into the cramped shelter of an old derelict sawmill while the Andartes sheltered in the timber stacked outside. During the night a fire broke out in one of the stacks, caused no doubt by a careless Andarte trying to keep warm. Everyone turned out to fight the fire and after an hour's frantic effort it was put out. Fortunately the fire did not go near the explosives, while the leaden sky and the falling snow hid the blaze from the enemy. Next morning the two guerrilla leaders with Myers and Woodhouse left, making a rendezvous for the main party for one o'clock at a spot about half an hour from the viaduct. All were there on time. It was bitterly cold and everyone kept warm by stamping around the small plateau, swinging their arms and blowing on their hands.

Just on dusk Myers despatched the two parties who were to cut the telephone and railway lines. An hour after darkness the rest of the party moved down to the flat. The moon was not up; in pitch dark the silent men groped their way down the slope, keeping contact by placing their hands on the shoulders of those in front or by holding on to the tails of the mules. Later on the moon gave light, but fortunately there were enough clouds in the sky to keep it from getting too bright. The force stopped at the source of the Gorgopotamos stream—three large springs flowing from the base of the cliffs—and was here split up into the prearranged teams. While the two attacking parties moved quietly off, the demolition party unloaded the explosives from the mules and arranged them into carrying loads. With Yianni of Stromni village acting

as guide, the party reached its assembly point before zero hour. Here they were to wait for the signal announcing the capture of the garrison.

Suddenly there was a roar of fire—the attack had started. The Andartes opened up with everything they had and for ten minutes there was a deafening din. The firing died down to surge up again every few minutes into concentrated volleys. Half an hour went by—the estimated time limit for the capture of the garrison—but the firing was still going on. \* The anxiety, and also the impatience, of the waiting men grew as the minutes stretched out to an hour. Then, faintly above the roar of the stream, they heard Myers calling out, ‘Go in, Tom!’ A short pause followed and again it was the same call, ‘Go in, Tom!’ The relief was like the release of a trigger; the agonizing wait for the past hour was forgotten as Barnes and his party walked quickly in single file towards the viaduct. The demolition plan had been worked out on the assumption that the garrison would be destroyed before the charges were laid. However, Barnes and the others had prepared themselves for an eventuality like this, and they were confident that they could blow up the viaduct while the Andartes engaged the garrison.

Barnes cut the wire around the base and, regardless of possible mines, he and the others ran to the pier. In the manner so often rehearsed the three sapper officers and their assistants placed themselves by the pier legs ready to tie the charges. But the frames to which the charges were attached refused to go into the leg section of the pier. To their dismay they found that the leg sections, instead of being L-shaped as they had been told, were more like a square U. They cursed underneath their breath as they ripped the charges off the frames; they could still do the job but it would take longer. Working like madmen, they packed the charges inside the leg sections and within half an hour had finished. They paused for an instant when they noticed that the firing had died down on both banks. Then, carefully and quickly they fixed the detonators and fuses in two places on the rings of explosive fuse connecting the charges. Barnes blew a whistle warning the assistants to take cover. At that instant a red flare shot up from the

**south bank. The garrison had been overcome. But there was no signal from the north bank; it was heard afterwards that the officer there was immobilised by a leg wound and did not get word of success from his men who were busily collecting loot.**

**Barnes and Edmonds struck the fuse caps, waited until they were well alight and then dashed for cover about twenty yards away. Flattened out against the ground, they were shaken by the sudden tremendous blast and by the thousands of pieces of red hot metal flying in all directions. As soon as the last echo had died away, they were on their feet again and were delighted to see that two of the spans were down and that one was twisted completely out of shape. The remains of the pier stood at a rakish angle with eight feet cut from its base.**

**There was still time for more work. Charges were fixed to the span which was not twisted and also to the second pier. Glancing over to the north end of the viaduct from which they heard a voice, they were happy to hear Myers calling out, 'Congratulations, good work.' Shortly afterwards Woodhouse, from the west side of the stream, yelled a message to them: 'Reinforcement train has arrived from Larissa. Andartes have stopped them and are holding them. As soon as you have fired the charges the withdrawal signal will be given. You will have to get out immediately.' They looked up to the bank and saw the train. The enemy soldiers had taken cover and were firing back at the Andartes. Barnes and his men had almost finished fixing the charges and it did not take them long to attach the detonators and fuses. The charges were fired. Again there was an ear-splitting explosion. At the same time the party saw a green light, the signal to withdraw.**

MOUNT GIONA



**MOUNT GIONA**

British agents with Greek guerrillas.  
C. E. Barnes (then Captain) is second  
from the left, wearing beret



**British agents with Greek guerrillas. C. E. Barnes (then Captain) is second from the left, wearing beret**



A Greek lad who fought for ELAS

***INTO GREECE***

**A Greek lad who fought for ELAS**



LIEUTENANT-COLONEL C. E. BARNES

**LIEUTENANT-COLONEL C. E. BARNES**





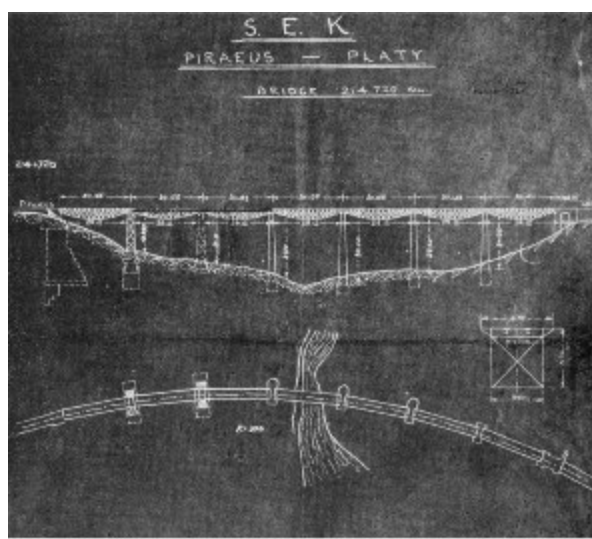
LIEUTENANT-COLONEL A. EDMONDS

**LIEUTENANT-COLONEL A. EDMONDS**



The Simplon-Orient express on the Gorgopotamos viaduct. The saboteurs used this photograph which, with the print below, was the only information available before the operation

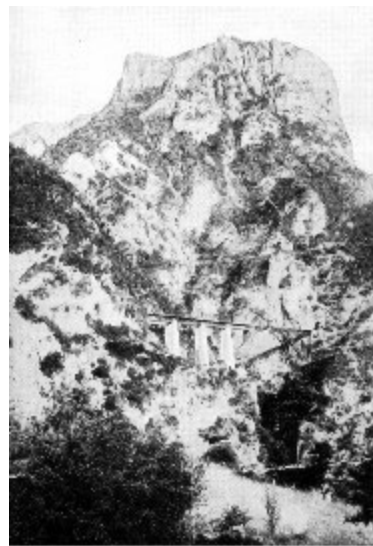
**The Simplon-Orient express on the Gorgopotamos viaduct. The saboteurs used this photograph which, with the print below, was the only information available before the operation**



The original blueprint of the plan and section of the Gorgopotamos viaduct

**The original blueprint of the plan and section of the Gorgopotamos viaduct**

***ASOP [ gap — reason: unclear] DUCT***



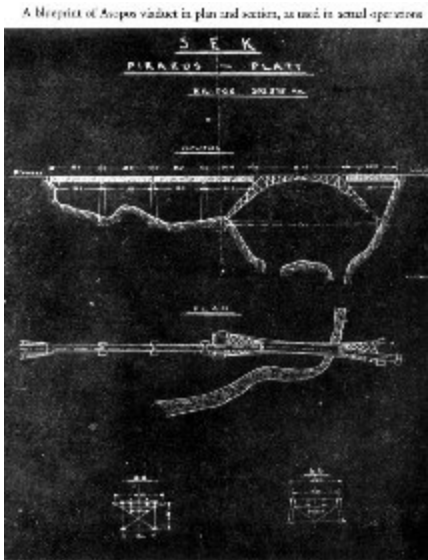
A postcard of Asopos viaduct

**A postcard of Asopos viaduct**



The photostat of 1909 was an important aid for the special planning their work

**This photostat of a [ gap — reason: unclear] 1909 was an important aid for the special [ gap — reason: unclear]ning their work**



**A blueprint of Asopos viaduct in plan and section, as used in actual operations**



Major C. M. Woodhouse (left), who in September 1943 succeeded Brigadier E. Myers as commander of the British Military Mission in Greece. Major 'Jerry' Wines, US Army, co-commander of what became the Allied Military Mission, is on the right

**Major C. M. Woodhouse (left), who in September 1943 succeeded Brigadier E. Myers as commander of the British Military Mission in Greece. Major 'Jerry' Wines, US Army, co-commander of what became the Allied Military Mission, is on the right**



Andartes resting

**Andartes resting**



Colonel Zervas, leader of the EDES guerrillas

**Colonel Zervas, leader of the EDES guerrillas**



Andartes at meal time

**Andartes at meal time**



Ares, leader of the ELAS guerrillas, with one of his aides, a 15-year-old boy

**Ares, leader of the ELAS guerrillas, with one of his aides, a 15-year-old boy**



Lieutenant-Colonel Edmonds (left) shown with other special service agents. The two in the middle are Captain Keith Scott and Lieutenant Harry McIntyre, the sappers who fixed the charges to Asopos viaduct. The photograph was taken near Lamia

**Lieutenant-Colonel Edmonds (left) shown with other special service agents. The two in the middle are Captain Keith Scott and Lieutenant Harry McIntyre, the sappers who fixed the charges to Asopos viaduct. The photograph was taken near [Lamia](#)**



Major D. J. Stott

**Major D. J. Stott**

Captain R. M. Morton, photographed in Australia before the operation in Borneo (see page 31)



Captain R. M. Morton, photographed in [Australia](#) before the operation in [Borneo](#) ( see [page 31](#))

**The retreating men were dead tired. They dragged themselves up the mountain slope; often they fell down exhausted and at the limit of endurance. Some even fell asleep. Those who were on their feet helped and urged the others on. Edmonds describes the climb: ‘As I began to climb my system reacted to the unusual exertions of the past forty-eight hours. My legs suddenly became heavy and the strength seemed to flow out of my body. I was compelled to sit down utterly exhausted. I could have easily thrown myself down and gone to sleep.’ On his frequent pauses to rest Barnes watched the Andartes struggling up the slope and admired their endurance: ‘It is a tribute to Greek Andarte endurance that these Andartes, for the most part badly clothed, badly shod (many barefooted except for a piece of cloth or goat hide) accomplished the descent and ascent of Mount Oiti, 5,000 feet high, and walked mostly through deep snow for 25 to 30 hours in all. This included carrying their arms and a three hours battle at Gorgopotamos bridge. One hurried meal was all the food they had in this period.’**

**Thus ended the first organised attack in occupied [Greece](#) on Axis forces. It was also the first and the only time that the Andarte forces of EDES and ELAS fought together. During the rest of the occupation their differences grew into hatred to the point of civil war. Fighting the Germans seemed to take second place to angling for control of the country after its liberation. The ELAS and EDES underground papers**

published glorious accounts of the fight, glamourising the part of their forces and minimising that of the other party. This increased the antagonism between the parties but also helped recruiting for both sides. It was seven weeks before the enemy had rebuilt the viaduct, and thereafter trains could cross only at slow speeds.

At the sawmill the tired men slept the clock round. When they awoke they found that Baba Niko, highly delighted at their success, had a big meal ready for them. The rest over, the whole force moved back to Mavrolitharion, where it broke up into separate groups. Ares and his guerrillas were the first to leave. A special farewell was given to Baba Niko before he returned to his village. All were sorry to see him go. Barnes paid this tribute to the old man: 'Here we left our friend who for two months by cajoling, threats and visits to villages had obtained our food from the terror-stricken villagers. He was our quartermaster, cook, safe guide and counsellor. He never once failed us in a task which I now know to have been well nigh impossible in those circumstances.' Myers and his party attached themselves to Zervas and started off with him to his headquarters in western Greece. Zervas moved warily through the country, dodging the numerous enemy patrols sent after him. The Andartes had no ammunition and were in no condition to fight it out with the strongly armed enemy forces. On 10 December the party arrived at Zervas' headquarters in Valtos and were billeted in Megalokhori village.

This was the first step on their way back to Egypt. They had accomplished their task and all were now keen to rejoin their units. Woodhouse, Marines, and two wireless operators were to stay on. On 12 December the remainder of the party left for the coast to meet the submarine which had been promised before they had left Egypt. They were at the rendezvous in time but the submarine never came. The trip to the coast was difficult enough but the one back to Zervas' headquarters was even more so. Barnes described their hardships: 'This was for all of us the hungriest and most uncomfortable three weeks in our lives as we carried all our gear—we had no mules—travelled mostly at



night in bad weather, and food was scarce indeed in Epirus.’

In the weeks which followed the men felt frustrated and out of temper with the authorities in Egypt, beginning to doubt whether they were making a genuine effort to help them. Their life was now one of run-and-hide from village to village to keep clear of the searching Italians. The winter was severe and all suffered intensely from the cold. Myers went down with a very bad attack of pneumonia and his condition was critical for some time. Meanwhile Zervas was active in carrying out raids on the Italians. Wireless communication was regularly maintained with **Cairo**; a New Zealander, Captain Bill Jordan, <sup>4</sup> was parachuted into **Greece** for this work. Frequent air drops of arms and ammunition were received and these were distributed among the Andartes. On 1 March 1943 a message came through from the **Middle East** ordering the party to stay in **Greece** to arrange supplies for the Andartes, to organise them into strong forces and help them in their fight against the enemy.

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\* ‘We had hoped for surprise but the garrison was alert.’—  
Comment by Lt-Col Edmonds.

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### *British Mission to the Greek Guerrillas*

**Greece** is well suited to guerrilla war. Most of the country is mountainous and the few plains which exist are cut off by ranges of desolate hills. There are no large towns apart from **Athens**, but the exhausted soil supports a poverty-stricken peasantry in widely separated villages. Roads are few and primitive, and in the mountain areas the only communication is either by foot or on mule. All this makes the country, even in peacetime, difficult to control. But most important of all is the spirit of the Greeks. During centuries of foreign rule they never submitted to captivity but fought fiercely for freedom. The Germans and the Italians had come to **Greece** as conquerors and were hated.

Even before the Gorgopotamos party arrived in **Greece**, small bands had taken to the hills from which they carried out minor raids on the

enemy. The most important of these bands were those formed by Zervas and Ares. When Myers and his men parachuted into **Greece** they found that the two bands were few in numbers, had hardly any arms and ammunition, had little training and experience, and were poorly clothed and equipped. During the next two years these bands grew into small armies, the ELAS by far the greater of the two. Its strength at the end of 1943 was estimated at 20,000, and that of EDES at 5000.

After the saboteurs had received orders to stay in **Greece** and attach themselves to the guerrilla forces, they received arms and supplies from the **Middle East**. These were distributed to the guerrillas. Also, large sums of money were paid locally for clothing and feeding the swiftly growing numbers. Myers, now a brigadier, became head of what was called the British Mission to the Greek Guerrillas. His second-in-command was Woodhouse; Barnes was liaison officer with Zervas while Edmonds was liaison officer with Ares at ELAS headquarters. Under these men a secret organisation grew, covering all **Greece**. More and more soldiers came to **Greece** to join the British Mission, and by the end of 1944 it had four hundred men of various nationalities on its staff.

With the arrival of **United States** officers the mission was renamed the Allied Military Mission. Woodhouse became its commander after Myers left in September 1943.

# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## [SECTION]

IN September 1942 Colonel F. M. H. Hanson, <sup>1</sup> Chief Engineer **2 NZEF**, sent for Captains C. E. Barnes <sup>2</sup> and A. Edmonds <sup>3</sup> and, interviewing them separately, told them that General Sir Harold Alexander, GOC-in-C **Middle East**, wanted two sapper officers from the New Zealand Division to join a sabotage party in blowing up an important railway viaduct in **Greece**. The saboteurs were to drop by parachute, meet pro-allied Greeks, and with their help destroy the viaduct. They were to be well supplied with explosives and arms but for food and other necessities were expected to live off the country. Little was known of conditions inside **Greece** apart from the fact that the Germans and Italians were hated and that any British party there could expect the sympathy, if not the active help, of the Greeks. The work of the party was to be confined to this single operation, and as soon as it was finished every endeavour was to be made to get the men away again. No definite promises could be made, and if there was a slip-up in the plans the party would have to stay in hiding for as long as possible, even until the liberation of **Greece**. Colonel Hanson said it was up to the two officers to say yes or no; the task was dangerous and was outside the accepted hazards of a soldier's life. There was to be no compulsion at all. If they declined nothing more would be said or heard about it, as **General Freyberg** and himself were the only persons in the Division who knew about the proposed operation. Barnes said yes, as did Edmonds.

Early next day Major C. M. Woodhouse, an English officer who already had worked in occupied **Greece**, called on the two sapper officers and took them to the headquarters organising the proposed operation. There they met Brigadier Keeble who was commander of what the special service agents called 'The Firm'; all secret Allied activity in the enemy-occupied **Balkans** was directed from here. Keeble stressed, first of all, there there was no time to lose and that the demolition—given the code-name of **HARLING**—was to be done quickly, otherwise it would be of no

benefit. He went on to describe the general purpose of the operation. A main supply route of the Axis was the single-track railway down the centre of Greece to the port of Piraeus, from where supplies for North Africa were either shipped or flown by way of Crete to Tobruk and Benghazi. At this time, late 1942, all of Europe and most of North Africa were controlled by the enemy, and although the Eighth Army in Egypt was building up for the offensive at Alamein, the war was by no means going in the Allies' favour. Keeble told the two New Zealanders that General Alexander considered that if the Greek railway line was put out of commission for a few weeks, Rommel would be badly hit by lack of supplies; and with the Germans so weakened, the Eighth Army's attack at Alamein would have a much greater chance of success. The GOC-in-C had attached so much importance to this operation that he had directed that it be given priority over all others.

Keeble then gave details of the proposed operation. The target was one of three railway viaducts in the Brallos Pass area, namely Gorgopotamos, Asopos and Papadia. He said that he would like to see Asopos destroyed: this viaduct, a huge structure spanning a deep gorge, was one of the most spectacular on the Greek railway and would take several weeks to rebuild. However, the choice of the viaduct was to be left to the leader of the party. Barnes and Edmonds were given plans of the viaducts and were asked to estimate what explosives would be required.

Both officers were rushed through the normal three weeks' parachute course in two days. The commander of HARLING, Colonel E. Myers of the Royal Engineers, joined them at the school. The sabotage party was divided into three teams of four men, consisting of a leader, an interpreter, a sapper and a wireless operator. For greater security the men were given code-names, their Christian names or nicknames usually being used. Three planes were to carry the teams with their quotas of stores, explosives, arms, ammunition and wireless sets. On the first plane were Colonel Eddie Myers as the leader of both a team and of the whole party; the interpreter was Captain Denys Hamson, the sapper

**was Captain Tom Barnes and the wireless operator was Sergeant Len Wilmot. The team on the second plane, in the same order as the first, were Major Chris Woodhouse, Captain Themie Marines, Captain Inder Gill and Sergeant Doug Phillips. The third plane carried Major John Cook, Captain Nat Barker, Captain Arthur Edmonds and Sergeant Mike Chittis. Barnes and Edmonds were the only New Zealanders.**

# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## PARACHUTE LANDING

### *Parachute Landing*

On the night of 28 September 1942 the aircraft left Egypt and headed for **Greece**. They flew high to keep out of trouble, but when central **Greece** was reached they came in low over the target area. The planes hovered around looking for the signal fires; they skimmed the hilltops and flew through the valleys but nowhere below were the expected signals. Two hours were so spent, flying forwards and backwards; to delay any longer would expose the aircraft to daylight attack on their return journey, so they returned to Egypt. The men were tired and dejected and were glad to hear that they were to have two days' rest before the next attempt. A few years later Edmonds found out why there were no signal fires that night. In Athens he met Professor Seferiadis, a Greek special service agent who was supposed to have received the sabotage party. Seferiadis told him that he had been arrested while on his way to the dropping area and had not been able to get word back in time for another agent to take his place.

The planes set off again for **Greece** on 30 September. On this trip Woodhouse and Cook switched leadership of parties, but apart from this there was no other change. If no flares were seen, the men were instructed to land on any spot in the area suitable for jumping. They were then to collect as quickly as possible.

The plane Edmonds was in reached Mount Giona and after a few sweeps picked up the light from three fires grouped in a small basin. Although it was not the expected signal the men jumped. They all landed away from the fires and, after hiding their parachutes and flying kit, cautiously edged their way to the fires. There they found a Greek lieutenant, a Cypriot soldier and a young lad from the nearby village. These three had heard the aircraft on the first fruitless flight and on the second night had lit fires in the hope that something—food,

ammunition, anything at all— would be dropped; but they had not expected men. They all huddled around the fire until dawn when they collected the stores containers. The first big disappointment was to find the wireless smashed. Once all the stores were accounted for they had a closer look at the country and wondered how they had missed injury in landing on such mountainous terrain. The young lad, Andreas, took them to a nearby cave, perfectly concealed, where they settled in. The day wore on but still there was no sign of the other parties.

Later in the day the leader, Woodhouse, went off with Andreas to Amfissa, an Italian garrison town not far away, where he intended to make a reconnaissance and, if possible, send a runner to **Athens** with a message to an agent who would forward it to **Cairo** on one of the secret transmitting sets known to be there. Edmonds and the others cleaned the gear and stored it in the cave. The cave itself was not pleasant to live in and the men moved out to an open camp, where the parachutes were used as blankets and shelter. Another Cypriot, a cousin of the other, joined the party.

There was nothing to do now but wait until Woodhouse came back. The days dragged by slowly and there was still no word of the other two parties. Then on the seventh day they heard that a British party was on its way to the camp; the news was like a tonic after a week of seclusion and enforced inactivity. In the afternoon Hamson and Wilmot arrived and all gathered around eager to know what had happened to them. Like Woodhouse's party, they had jumped over fires in a densely wooded valley but had had to wait until dawn before they could come together. The country was very broken and the stores containers fell over a wide area. People from the local village were out early collecting the stores: they looked upon them as booty and refused to give them up. Some of the containers were returned later, mostly the explosives. A few of the village children ate the explosives thinking they were sweets and became very sick. The area was not safe, and when Italian troops came looking for the parachutists they moved on. Before doing so they buried all the gear they had managed to salvage. Their wireless set, like

Woodhouse's, had been badly damaged in the drop.

The leader of a small band of brigands, Karalivanos, who had attached himself to Myers' party, was introduced. A short, strongly built man, with a heavy black beard, Karalivanos was dressed in Greek national costume and had the appearance of an apparition from a bygone age. His jacket was heavily embroidered, he wore knee breeches and stockings, and even his shoes had the traditional black pom-poms. The finishing touches were added by the armoury he had wrapped around his body—grenades, pistols, ammunition and knives—and by the rows of medals on his chest.

With the exception of Woodhouse who was still away on reconnaissance, the two parties now joined up. The men had hardly settled in to their new camp when they were startled by an old man bursting in on them. 'We heard the rattle of stones on the slope above us and like a whirlwind a vigorous old man came into our camp, talking Greek with great speed and volume. Then suddenly the Greek stopped and he staggered us by saying with a marked American accent, "How are you, okay." "This newcomer hopped excitedly around the camp and never stopped talking for a moment. He was Nikos Beis from Lithoriki, a village about eight hours to the south, and when he had heard of the British party he had come to see if he could help. A rifle rested in the crook of his arm and the pockets of his ragged coat bulged with ammunition. A civilian cap was pulled well down on his head; he wore an old-fashioned pair of military breeches with puttees wound around his legs from the knees to just above the ankles, and his low shoes left the top part of his feet exposed. As a young man he had spent ten years in [America](#), but he had returned in 1912 to fight against the Bulgars and had never left [Greece](#) again. The men liked the old man from the start and even more so as the days went by. Baba 'Uncle' Niko, as he was affectionately called, gathered food and cooked for them, his advice on the country and the people was always reliable, and he wanted nothing for himself but to see the party strike a blow against the hated enemy. Edmonds, in one of his subsequent reports, said that the party looked



upon Baba Niko as its saviour and that, without his help, it could easily have failed in its objective.

Niko had a very poor opinion of Karalivanos and went to no trouble to hide it. At the time Karalivanos was sulking, and it was plain to everyone that his attachment to the party was purely for what he could get out of it. When he saw that there was no hope of free goods, he stopped helping in the work of the camp and became more and more obstructive. Niko exploded with wrath when he heard Karalivanos saying that there were no mules in the locality. 'Mules,' he said, 'Why, there are plenty. I'll get as many as you want.' He left the camp immediately and promised to be back in a few days with a whole team.

Woodhouse came back from Amfissa and shortly afterwards, on 9 October, there was an air drop of supplies. The high wind scattered these over a wide area. Karalivanos and his men went to work with a will but their eagerness slackened off when they found they were collecting explosives, not food. The noise of the planes brought Italian troops to the locality searching for parachutists and also questioning the villagers. With the idea of collecting the stores left behind, Karalivanos tried to panic the party into leaving, but Myers had the measure of the man and refused to be rushed. The Italians kept within range of the villages and did not venture too far into the mountains.

Baba Niko returned proudly leading a string of fifteen mules. 'And,' he said, 'there will be fifteen more along in the morning.' At dawn next day he started out with the first section of the party for a place he knew which was much more secure than the present one; a few hours later the second section followed with the rest of the mules. Myers and Woodhouse remained to await the arrival of the second team of mules. All this activity was maddening to Karalivanos as he sullenly stood by, thinking of what he could have purloined and how he had missed. He called his band together and they all walked away—a good riddance, everyone thought. But they had not finished with brigands. Another one, Barfas, arrived about this time and was taken into the party; he seemed to be a better type and more reliable than his predecessor.

The journey through the mountains was hard. The guides kept away from villages, making wide detours through the wild country. There was no let-up in the steady, yet exhausting, pace of the guides as they plunged down into valleys and climbed up steep hillsides. Heavy mist covered the mountains, and it was only by calling out that the parties managed to reassemble in the afternoon. Another recruit was added to the party when Baba Niko introduced Mikhali Khouri, a Palestinian Arab soldier, who had been left behind in Greece and who had been in hiding ever since. He was a well-built man of about 28. His beard was beautifully trimmed and his hair long; and he wore, at a jaunty angle, a red Evzone cap with a long tassel. On each shoulder of his khaki jacket he had a big silver star, and wrapped around him was an array of bandoliers, knives and grenades. A well-kept tommy gun was slung on his back and he carried a shepherd's crook. He spoke very broken English but this was no hindrance to his volubility. He boasted shamelessly of his exploits but did it in such a good-natured way that it was almost refreshing. After he had been sized up he was accepted into the party. Khouri became a valued special service agent and his worth was recognised by the award of the MM and later by a bar to the same decoration.

Khouri left almost immediately to search for food. It snowed heavily in the night, and next morning the party continued its journey in the cold and mist. When Khouri joined the party again, the men noticed that he had taken the silver stars off his shoulders and had placed three chevrons on his arm. His real rank was private, but evidently he felt that he owed it to his numerous Greek friends to hold on to some pretence of rank.

The new camp was on the opposite side of Mount Giona, near the village of Mavrolitharion. Myers was specially anxious to find out if there were guerrillas fighting in the mountains and, if so, where. But the local Greeks did not know of any. It looked as if the party would have to recruit its own supporting force from the nearby villages. In the

meantime there was plenty of work to be done on the stores. Everyone helped in cleaning and checking the arms and explosives. Barnes and Edmonds supervised the handling of the explosives and began breaking them down to more convenient sizes. Each day was fully taken up in these tasks.

Work was forgotten when a messenger from Stromni, the nearest village, came running up to warn them that three hundred Italians were at a place not three hours away looking for the party. The men watched the flat below and saw the Italians approaching and then pitching camp. It was dangerous to stay. Baba Niko again came to the rescue; he knew of an excellent hiding place about an hour away. Before moving, the party hid the stores and explosives near the cave and covered up all tell-tale signs of habitation. Sidling along the north-west slope of Giona, they could see that the Italians had thrown a cordon around the mountain. The new hiding place was a grass-covered ledge perched high on the mountainside and aptly called 'The Eagle's Nest'.

# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## RECONNAISSANCE

### *Reconnaissance*

Myers, Hamson and Yianni, of Stromni village, left immediately on a reconnaissance of the three viaducts. They moved at night and during the day were in well-concealed positions with a good view of the country. From the start they used code-names of their own making for the viaducts so as not to give an inkling of their intentions to the Greeks around them. Papadia was known as 'The Priest One', Gorgopotamos as 'The George One', and Asopos as 'The Soapy One'.

Of all the countries in **Europe**, with the possible exception of **Albania**, **Greece** was the least well supplied with railways. The main railway line, a single track, ran down the centre of **Greece** from Plati to **Piraeus**, a distance of some 300 miles. In pre-war days the famous Orient express did the trip in about eleven hours, while the ordinary passenger express took three hours longer. The line had to cross three great east-to-west ranges, and to overcome the difficulties of the terrain it was steeply graded and tortuous. Any high speed was impossible and the carrying capacity was low. The sabotage party was in the Oiti Mountains where the line was to be cut. From the plains to the south the train climbed the Oiti Range at a gradient of 1 in 50 up to the **Brallos** tunnel, by which the Kifissos-Sperkhios watershed was crossed. From the tunnel the train descended the steep and twisting Asopos Gorge, through many tunnels and over spectacular viaducts until it reached the narrow plain of Sperkhios. It was on this stretch that the three big viaducts were situated. At this time the line was working to full capacity carrying military supplies south.

Within a few days Myers returned, and to an intent audience related his observations. Asopos viaduct was in extremely difficult and precipitous country. It was perched over a sheer gorge with tunnels at either end and there was no easy access; it also had a strong garrison

and reinforcements were not far off. A surprise attack was out of the question, and altogether the prospects for a quick and successful demolition by a small force were poor. Papadia viaduct was near Asopos, but the approaches to it were too wide and there was no cover for a force to creep up to a convenient attacking place. It was heavily garrisoned and had quick communication with reinforcements in the neighbourhood. Gorgopotamos viaduct, eight miles north of Asopos, looked the best proposition of the lot. There was good access sufficiently open and yet well enough covered to allow an attacking force to operate. Likewise the line of retreat was quick. The nearest reinforcement was at Lianokladi, several miles to the north, while the Papadia and Asopos garrisons were even farther away to the south. There were about eighty men in the Gorgopotamos garrison and it was likely that, despite the fortified defences, a small force could capture the viaduct in a surprise attack. Gorgopotamos viaduct became the target.

Myers conferred with Barnes and Edmonds, gave them technical details of the viaduct, and placed Barnes in charge of the demolition party. Barnes estimated the stock of explosives at five hundred pounds and calculated that it would be enough for the task, allowing a very generous safety margin. \* One of the wireless batteries picked up sufficiently for the men to hear faintly that the Battle of **Alamein** was in progress. The news added to their impatience to get the job done quickly. They had been told, however, that if one of the viaducts was destroyed within two months their object would have been achieved.

News arrived that Colonel Zervas, a well-known Greek officer, was leading a band of guerrillas in the Valtos region on the west side of the **Pindus Mountains**. Woodhouse, a tireless walker, set off on 2 November to find him. It was understood that if he was not back in sixteen days, the party would attempt the attack with whatever men they could recruit in the locality.

The two sapper officers studied a blueprint of the Gorgopotamos viaduct and also a photograph showing the Orient express crossing it. In

length it was 674 feet and it stood 105 feet above the river. It consisted of seven steel spans supported by four stone and two steel piers. Barnes and Edmonds decided to cut the higher of the two steel piers near its base and so bring down two of the spans. By cutting a section out of one side of this pier, the spans would fall to one side and become twisted so much out of shape that it would be impossible to use them again. If there was enough time the second steel pier would also be cut. Barnes set the party a rigorous preparation and training schedule. The explosives were made malleable and converted into smaller sizes. This was a long and tedious job at which everybody took a turn. Finally the explosives were tied to boards for better carrying and handling. From a farmer who knew the viaduct it was learned that the steel legs of the pier were in L-shaped sections. A dummy pier leg was fashioned

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\* Lt-Col Edmonds comments: 'Invariably when planning a demolition we calculated the minimum charges required, then, reckoning that once we reached the target we must be certain there were no hitches, we would double the charge to allow for them being faultily placed in the haste of the operation. If explosive was available we might even double up on those charges.'

'When lecturing the [Haifa](#) sabotage school on this operation later, I staggered them by telling them the quantity we used. The same result could have been achieved with one-tenth of the total charge, but of course we were in the dark as to the size of bridge members until we reached the target.'

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out of wood and by day and night the men practised tying charges to it. They prepared themselves for anything unusual that might arise, and so skilled did they become that Barnes considered that if everything went according to plan the pier could be demolished in ten minutes.

There were rumours of another British party somewhere in the mountains but they were not definite enough to identify it as that led by Cook. To the surprise and joy of all, on 14 November Cook and his three men walked into the camp. Apart from the company, four more men

were a welcome addition to the little sabotage party. But even more welcome was the news that Cook had got in touch with a band of guerrillas led by one Ares and had been escorted on the way by them. On the night that the others had parachuted into Greece, Cook could not find a good dropping place and was forced to return to Egypt. After two more unsuccessful attempts, his party jumped on fires on the outskirts of Karpenissi which, unknown to them, was a heavily garrisoned town. The Italians opened fire on them in the air but fortunately all landed safely. Three came down on a hill to the east of the town and were immediately surrounded by soldiers. They hid for a while until the search slackened, then cautiously made their way into the security of the more distant hills. The other man landed right in the middle of the town and was immediately hidden by the townspeople. When the excitement had died down, the Greeks conducted the men to the guerrilla leader, Ares.

The guerrillas—or Andartes, to give them their Greek name—who had come with Cook stood in groups around the camp. Their ages ranged from 18 to 35; they were strongly built and nearly all were bearded. They were poorly dressed in a collection of old and ragged uniforms and many were barefooted. Their arms were an assortment of all types of rifles, though a few carried captured Breda machine guns.

On 17 November Woodhouse came back with more good news. He had reached Valtos in the record time of six days and without difficulty had found Zervas and his band of Andartes. At the time Zervas had an Italian battalion bottled up in a narrow gorge and was picking them off until the inevitable arrival of reinforcements would force him to withdraw. So keen was he to help the British party that he called the action off, and after selecting forty-five of his best men, left immediately for Mavrolitharion which, by forced marches, was reached in eight days. On his Valtos journey Woodhouse heard of a British party staying with a guerrilla band and, as he had expected, found Cook and the three others. He vouched for them to the leader, Ares, who had been somewhat suspicious of them, and also induced him and his band of

eighty to join the intended operation.

Colonel Zervas, who had accompanied Woodhouse, was introduced. He was then over fifty years old, was of short build and inclined to stoutness; his beard was long and like his hair, already greying, was well groomed. He wore a clean and well-kept khaki uniform and also a small cap of the same colour. In manner he was calm and assured and instinctively he commanded the respect of all who met him. Zervas was well known in **Greece** and, like so many Greeks, had had an up-and-down career in politics. A member of the regular army, he went over to the Venizelos revolutionary government in 1916 and had advanced rapidly in the Venizelist army. Closely involved in the quickly changing political life of the times, he took part in the revolt that overthrew General Pangalos and his dictatorship in 1926. His political fortunes slumped thereafter and he was forced to retire from the army. Out of politics he switched to the whirl of social life in **Athens** and established for himself a reputation as a playboy and gambler. After the German invasion he joined a newly formed republican party called the Greek Democratic National League—better known by its Greek initials of EDES—and was selected to lead a guerrilla band under its sponsorship. In June 1942 he started recruiting followers in western **Greece**, his birthplace, and soon he had a sizeable force carrying out raids on the enemy.

On the way to Mavrolitharion where Ares and his guerrillas were billeted, the British party was given a great ovation by the villagers and had their first sight of Ares. He was poles apart from Zervas. Short and of slight build, \* everything he did—moving and talking—was done quickly and spiritedly. His nose was small and hooked and his eyes sharp and brown. In keeping with the guerrilla fashion, he had a black, bushy beard. From his wrist hung a vicious looking leather whip. He described himself as a schoolteacher and it was easily seen that he was well educated and also very intelligent. At this meeting Ares was pleasant but the men soon found out his real nature. He was cold-hearted and cruel and, in the manner of a fanatic, was ruthless to anybody who stood in his way. He was a sadist and delighted in horrible forms of torturing and



**killing his victims. He was reputed to be a homosexual and to have served prison sentences for these offences.**

**Ares joined the Communist party in the pre-war days and went to [Russia](#) for training; it was reported that he had fought in the Spanish Civil War. Nobody was ever sure of his real name though the most commonly accepted version was Athanassios Clarass. His birthplace was given as [Lamia](#). Ares was backed by an organisation of several parties of the Left called the National Liberation Front—better known to the Greeks and the outside world by the initials EAM. The real power of the organisation was in the hands of the Communist party, though this party went to great pains to conceal its control. By 1942 EAM had an efficient political organisation operating over most of central [Greece](#) and in that year it formed a military force, giving it the name of the National People's Liberation Army—the initials this time were ELAS. Ares was chosen as the leader, and as such was one of the personalities who shaped the history of [Greece](#) during the war and the years immediately following. He was killed in 1945 in a fight with Government forces. His head was cut off, impaled on a stake, and set up in the village square of [Trikkala](#).**

**The two guerrilla leaders agreed to combine for the attack on the viaduct and Zervas was placed in charge. This was the first time the two had ever met, and it was the only time during the whole occupation that they combined in a common action. Zervas and Ares sent their men to reconnoitre the viaduct, and when they came back Myers worked out plans for the final assault.**

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**\* Edmonds comments that Ares ‘filled out amazingly during the next two years when he wore out saddles instead of boots.’**

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# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## ASSEMBLY POINT AND ATTACK

### *Assembly Point and Attack*

The attack on the garrison was to be by night, and if possible by surprise. Two parties of eight Andartes each were to cut the railway and telephone lines and were to remain to cover the demolition and hold up reinforcements until the withdrawal signal, a green Very light, was given. The main force of a hundred men was to attack at 11 p.m. on 25 November. Mikhali Myridakis, a regular artillery officer and second-in-command to Zervas, was to lead a party of eighty against the main garrison, while another party of twenty was assigned to deal with the northern defences. The demolition party was split into three teams of four men, each under one of the sapper officers, Barnes, Edmonds and Gill. Another party of three under Hamson was to assist as required. The demolition party was to wait five hundred yards upstream from the viaduct until the signal—a white light from the north bank and a red one from the south—was received that the garrison had been eliminated. Headquarters was to be set up on the north bank with Zervas in charge, and Myers and Woodhouse were to remain there.

The move to the Gorgopotamos viaduct began on 24 November. The whole force, with the exception of Ares and a few of his men, moved off that morning for the assembly point on top of Mount Oiti. Ares had a reason for delaying his march as the men found out later from Barker, who had stayed with him. A man from a neighbouring village was accused of sheep stealing and Ares summoned all the villagers to the square to witness the trial. In villages to which Ares had access, he had dissolved the civil police and had undertaken to maintain law and order himself. Ares thrashed the man mercilessly with his leather whip until he was forced to confess. Ares then drew his pistol and shot him through the head. He told the people that was how he dealt with wrongdoers.

The trudge up the mountain was exhausting and Edmonds marvelled

at the way Zervas, singing jazzy songs, led his men through the falling snow. The weather worsened and by the time they reached the top at four in the afternoon there was a howling blizzard. The soldiers were glad to creep into the cramped shelter of an old derelict sawmill while the Andartes sheltered in the timber stacked outside. During the night a fire broke out in one of the stacks, caused no doubt by a careless Andarte trying to keep warm. Everyone turned out to fight the fire and after an hour's frantic effort it was put out. Fortunately the fire did not go near the explosives, while the leaden sky and the falling snow hid the blaze from the enemy. Next morning the two guerrilla leaders with Myers and Woodhouse left, making a rendezvous for the main party for one o'clock at a spot about half an hour from the viaduct. All were there on time. It was bitterly cold and everyone kept warm by stamping around the small plateau, swinging their arms and blowing on their hands.

Just on dusk Myers despatched the two parties who were to cut the telephone and railway lines. An hour after darkness the rest of the party moved down to the flat. The moon was not up; in pitch dark the silent men groped their way down the slope, keeping contact by placing their hands on the shoulders of those in front or by holding on to the tails of the mules. Later on the moon gave light, but fortunately there were enough clouds in the sky to keep it from getting too bright. The force stopped at the source of the Gorgopotamos stream—three large springs flowing from the base of the cliffs—and was here split up into the prearranged teams. While the two attacking parties moved quietly off, the demolition party unloaded the explosives from the mules and arranged them into carrying loads. With Yianni of Stromni village acting as guide, the party reached its assembly point before zero hour. Here they were to wait for the signal announcing the capture of the garrison.

Suddenly there was a roar of fire—the attack had started. The Andartes opened up with everything they had and for ten minutes there was a deafening din. The firing died down to surge up again every few minutes into concentrated volleys. Half an hour went by—the estimated

time limit for the capture of the garrison—but the firing was still going on. \* The anxiety, and also the impatience, of the waiting men grew as the minutes stretched out to an hour. Then, faintly above the roar of the stream, they heard Myers calling out, 'Go in, Tom!' A short pause followed and again it was the same call, 'Go in, Tom!' The relief was like the release of a trigger; the agonizing wait for the past hour was forgotten as Barnes and his party walked quickly in single file towards the viaduct. The demolition plan had been worked out on the assumption that the garrison would be destroyed before the charges were laid. However, Barnes and the others had prepared themselves for an eventuality like this, and they were confident that they could blow up the viaduct while the Andartes engaged the garrison.

Barnes cut the wire around the base and, regardless of possible mines, he and the others ran to the pier. In the manner so often rehearsed the three sapper officers and their assistants placed themselves by the pier legs ready to tie the charges. But the frames to which the charges were attached refused to go into the leg section of the pier. To their dismay they found that the leg sections, instead of being L-shaped as they had been told, were more like a square U. They cursed underneath their breath as they ripped the charges off the frames; they could still do the job but it would take longer. Working like madmen, they packed the charges inside the leg sections and within half an hour had finished. They paused for an instant when they noticed that the firing had died down on both banks. Then, carefully and quickly they fixed the detonators and fuses in two places on the rings of explosive fuse connecting the charges. Barnes blew a whistle warning the assistants to take cover. At that instant a red flare shot up from the south bank. The garrison had been overcome. But there was no signal from the north bank; it was heard afterwards that the officer there was immobilised by a leg wound and did not get word of success from his men who were busily collecting loot.

Barnes and Edmonds struck the fuse caps, waited until they were well alight and then dashed for cover about twenty yards away.

**Flattened out against the ground, they were shaken by the sudden tremendous blast and by the thousands of pieces of red hot metal flying in all directions. As soon as the last echo had died away, they were on their feet again and were delighted to see that two of the spans were down and that one was twisted completely out of shape. The remains of the pier stood at a rakish angle with eight feet cut from its base.**

**There was still time for more work. Charges were fixed to the span which was not twisted and also to the second pier. Glancing over to the north end of the viaduct from which they heard a voice, they were happy to hear Myers calling out, 'Congratulations, good work.' Shortly afterwards Woodhouse, from the west side of the stream, yelled a message to them: 'Reinforcement train has arrived from Larissa. Andartes have stopped them and are holding them. As soon as you have fired the charges the withdrawal signal will be given. You will have to get out immediately.' They looked up to the bank and saw the train. The enemy soldiers had taken cover and were firing back at the Andartes. Barnes and his men had almost finished fixing the charges and it did not take them long to attach the detonators and fuses. The charges were fired. Again there was an ear-splitting explosion. At the same time the party saw a green light, the signal to withdraw.**

MOUNT GIONA



MOUNT GIONA

British agents with Greek guerrillas.  
C. E. Barnes (then Captain) is second  
from the left, wearing beret



**British agents with Greek guerrillas. C. E. Barnes (then Captain) is second from the left, wearing  
beret**



A Greek lad who fought for ELAS

***INTO GREECE***  
**A Greek lad who fought for ELAS**



LIEUTENANT-COLONEL C. E. BARNES

**LIEUTENANT-COLONEL C. E. BARNES**



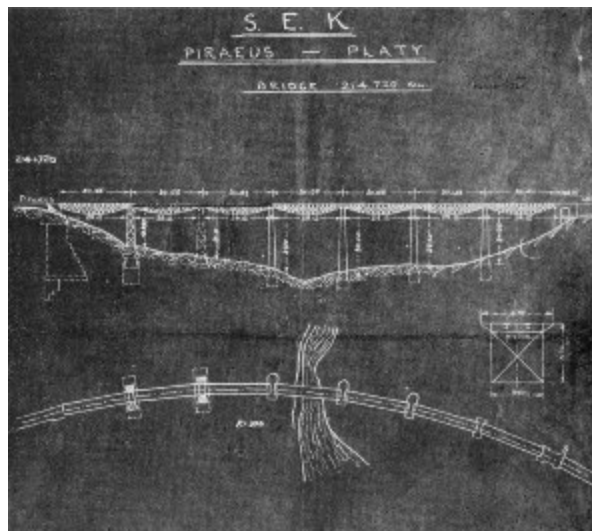
LIEUTENANT-COLONEL A. EDMONDS

**LIEUTENANT-COLONEL A. EDMONDS**



The Simplon-Orient express on the Gorgopotamos viaduct. The saboteurs used this photograph which, with the print below, was the only information available before the operation

**The Simplon-Orient express on the Gorgopotamos viaduct. The saboteurs used this photograph which, with the print below, was the only information available before the operation**

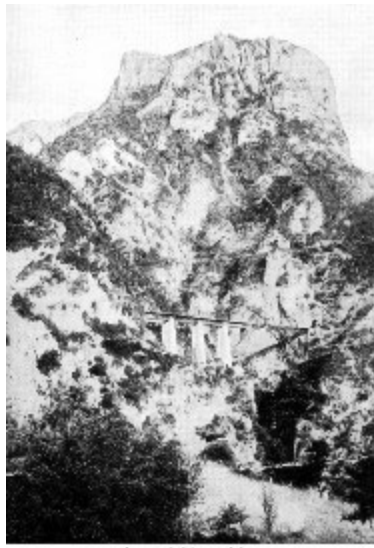


The original blueprint of the plan and section of the Gorgopotamos viaduct

**The original blueprint of the plan and section of the Gorgopotamos viaduct**

***ASOP [ gap — reason: unclear] DUCT***





A grand view of Asopos viaduct

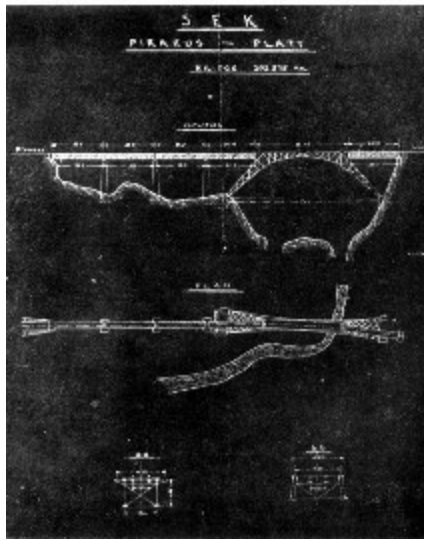
**A postcard of Asopos viaduct**



This photostat of 1909 was an important aid for the special [ gap — reason: unclear] planning their work

**This photostat of a [ gap — reason: unclear] 1909 was an important aid for the special [ gap — reason: unclear]ning their work**

A blueprint of Asopos viaduct in plan and section, as used in actual operations



**A blueprint of Asopos viaduct in plan and section, as used in actual operations**



Major C. M. Woodhouse (left), who in September 1943 succeeded Brigadier E. Myers as commander of the British Military Mission in Greece. Major 'Jerry' Wines, US Army, co-commander of what became the Allied Military Mission, is on the right

**Major C. M. Woodhouse (left), who in September 1943 succeeded Brigadier E. Myers as commander of the British Military Mission in Greece. Major 'Jerry' Wines, US Army, co-commander of what became the Allied Military Mission, is on the right**



Andartes resting

**Andartes resting**



Colonel Zervas, leader of the EDES guerrillas

**Colonel Zervas, leader of the EDES guerrillas**



Andartes at meal time

**Andartes at meal time**



Ares, leader of the ELAS guerrillas, with one of his aides, a 15-year-old boy

**Ares, leader of the ELAS guerrillas, with one of his aides, a 15-year-old boy**



Lieutenant-Colonel Edmonds (left) shown with other special service agents. The two in the middle are Captain Keith Scott and Lieutenant Harry McIntyre, the sappers who fixed the charges to Asopos viaduct. The photograph was taken near Lamia

**Lieutenant-Colonel Edmonds (left) shown with other special service agents. The two in the middle are Captain Keith Scott and Lieutenant Harry McIntyre, the sappers who fixed the charges to Asopos viaduct. The photograph was taken near **Lamia****





Major D. J. Stott

**Major D. J. Stott**



Captain R. M. Morton, photographed in Australia before the operation in Borneo. (see page 31)

**Captain R. M. Morton, photographed in [Australia](#) before the operation in [Borneo](#) ( see [page 31](#))**

**The retreating men were dead tired. They dragged themselves up the mountain slope; often they fell down exhausted and at the limit of endurance. Some even fell asleep. Those who were on their feet helped and urged the others on. Edmonds describes the climb: ‘As I began to climb my system reacted to the unusual exertions of the past forty-eight hours. My legs suddenly became heavy and the strength seemed to flow out of my body. I was compelled to sit down utterly exhausted. I could have easily thrown myself down and gone to sleep.’ On his frequent pauses to rest Barnes watched the Andartes struggling up the slope and admired their endurance: ‘It is a tribute to Greek Andarte endurance that these Andartes, for the most part badly clothed, badly shod (many**

barefooted except for a piece of cloth or goat hide) accomplished the descent and ascent of Mount Oiti, 5,000 feet high, and walked mostly through deep snow for 25 to 30 hours in all. This included carrying their arms and a three hours battle at Gorgopotamos bridge. One hurried meal was all the food they had in this period.'

Thus ended the first organised attack in occupied Greece on Axis forces. It was also the first and the only time that the Andarte forces of EDES and ELAS fought together. During the rest of the occupation their differences grew into hatred to the point of civil war. Fighting the Germans seemed to take second place to angling for control of the country after its liberation. The ELAS and EDES underground papers published glorious accounts of the fight, glamourising the part of their forces and minimising that of the other party. This increased the antagonism between the parties but also helped recruiting for both sides. It was seven weeks before the enemy had rebuilt the viaduct, and thereafter trains could cross only at slow speeds.

At the sawmill the tired men slept the clock round. When they awoke they found that Baba Niko, highly delighted at their success, had a big meal ready for them. The rest over, the whole force moved back to Mavrolitharion, where it broke up into separate groups. Ares and his guerrillas were the first to leave. A special farewell was given to Baba Niko before he returned to his village. All were sorry to see him go. Barnes paid this tribute to the old man: 'Here we left our friend who for two months by cajoling, threats and visits to villages had obtained our food from the terror-stricken villagers. He was our quartermaster, cook, safe guide and counsellor. He never once failed us in a task which I now know to have been well nigh impossible in those circumstances.' Myers and his party attached themselves to Zervas and started off with him to his headquarters in western Greece. Zervas moved warily through the country, dodging the numerous enemy patrols sent after him. The Andartes had no ammunition and were in no condition to fight it out with the strongly armed enemy forces. On 10 December the party arrived at Zervas' headquarters in Valtos and were billeted in

**Megalokhori village.**

**This was the first step on their way back to Egypt. They had accomplished their task and all were now keen to rejoin their units. Woodhouse, Marines, and two wireless operators were to stay on. On 12 December the remainder of the party left for the coast to meet the submarine which had been promised before they had left Egypt. They were at the rendezvous in time but the submarine never came. The trip to the coast was difficult enough but the one back to Zervas' headquarters was even more so. Barnes described their hardships: 'This was for all of us the hungriest and most uncomfortable three weeks in our lives as we carried all our gear—we had no mules—travelled mostly at night in bad weather, and food was scarce indeed in Epirus.'**

**In the weeks which followed the men felt frustrated and out of temper with the authorities in Egypt, beginning to doubt whether they were making a genuine effort to help them. Their life was now one of run-and-hide from village to village to keep clear of the searching Italians. The winter was severe and all suffered intensely from the cold. Myers went down with a very bad attack of pneumonia and his condition was critical for some time. Meanwhile Zervas was active in carrying out raids on the Italians. Wireless communication was regularly maintained with **Cairo**; a New Zealander, Captain Bill Jordan,<sup>4</sup> was parachuted into **Greece** for this work. Frequent air drops of arms and ammunition were received and these were distributed among the Andartes. On 1 March 1943 a message came through from the **Middle East** ordering the party to stay in **Greece** to arrange supplies for the Andartes, to organise them into strong forces and help them in their fight against the enemy.**

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**\* 'We had hoped for surprise but the garrison was alert.'—  
Comment by Lt-Col Edmonds.**

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# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## BRITISH MISSION TO THE GREEK GUERRILLAS

### *British Mission to the Greek Guerrillas*

**Greece** is well suited to guerrilla war. Most of the country is mountainous and the few plains which exist are cut off by ranges of desolate hills. There are no large towns apart from **Athens**, but the exhausted soil supports a poverty-stricken peasantry in widely separated villages. Roads are few and primitive, and in the mountain areas the only communication is either by foot or on mule. All this makes the country, even in peacetime, difficult to control. But most important of all is the spirit of the Greeks. During centuries of foreign rule they never submitted to captivity but fought fiercely for freedom. The Germans and the Italians had come to **Greece** as conquerors and were hated.

Even before the Gorgopotamos party arrived in **Greece**, small bands had taken to the hills from which they carried out minor raids on the enemy. The most important of these bands were those formed by Zervas and Ares. When Myers and his men parachuted into **Greece** they found that the two bands were few in numbers, had hardly any arms and ammunition, had little training and experience, and were poorly clothed and equipped. During the next two years these bands grew into small armies, the ELAS by far the greater of the two. Its strength at the end of 1943 was estimated at 20,000, and that of EDES at 5000.

After the saboteurs had received orders to stay in **Greece** and attach themselves to the guerrilla forces, they received arms and supplies from the **Middle East**. These were distributed to the guerrillas. Also, large sums of money were paid locally for clothing and feeding the swiftly growing numbers. Myers, now a brigadier, became head of what was called the British Mission to the Greek Guerrillas. His second-in-command was Woodhouse; Barnes was liaison officer with Zervas while Edmonds was liaison officer with Ares at ELAS headquarters. Under these men a secret organisation grew, covering all **Greece**. More and



more soldiers came to **Greece** to join the **British Mission**, and by the end of 1944 it had four hundred men of various nationalities on its staff.

With the arrival of **United States** officers the mission was renamed the **Allied Military Mission**. **Woodhouse** became its commander after **Myers** left in **September 1943**.

# EPIISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## ASOPOS VIADUCT

## **ASOPOS VIADUCT**

**WHEN** the first sabotage party dropped into **Greece** with orders to blow up one of the three viaducts, it was suggested to them that if possible, and if conditions permitted, Asopos viaduct be the choice. As it turned out, an attack on this viaduct was beyond the party's strength, so it selected and destroyed the next most important, Gorgopotamos. But Asopos was too valuable a target to be left alone. In May 1943 Brigadier Myers thought that there were enough forces in the locality to carry out a successful attack on it. He instructed Captain Edmonds, who was now the liaison officer in charge of the area where the viaduct was, to start planning for the destruction of 'The Soapy One' (the old code-name for Asopos) and to arrange the details of the attacking force with Ares. Myers gave a new code-name, **WASHING**, to the proposed operation.

Three sapper officers were already on their way into **Greece** to assist with the demolition. Besides these, there were also a few soldiers on the Mission staff, and altogether they constituted an effective, though small, force. Among the New Zealanders was Lieutenant Don Stott <sup>5</sup> (5 Field Regiment) who was working with Colonel Psarros, leader of an Andarte band, in the Parnassos-Giona locality. Sergeant Bob Morton <sup>6</sup> ( **5 Field Regiment**) was with him. The two were inseparable—as a friend said, 'Wherever Don was, Bob wasn't far away.'—and they were reputedly the most daring and resourceful of the special service agents in **Greece**. Stott was an Artillery sergeant and Morton a gunner when they were captured at the end of the Greek campaign. They escaped by pole-vaulting over the prison wire in full daylight and under the heavy fire of the guards. Several Greeks chased them, not to catch them but to pat them on the back and to wish them the best of luck. Stott and Morton disguised themselves, obtained false passports and were often hunted by enemy patrols. At one stage Morton became sick, and the two had to hide for a long time in a village where there was a doctor. They sailed three times from **Greece** but bad weather forced them back each time. After a first visit to **Athens** which nearly ended in capture, they managed to get in touch with the escape organisation and, within a

short time, were back in Egypt. Both then became special service agents and went on several operations.

Other New Zealanders working with Edmonds were Pte Lou Northover <sup>7</sup> (19 Battalion), Corporal Dick Hooper <sup>8</sup> (I General Hospital), and Driver Charlie Mutch <sup>9</sup> (4 Reserve MT Company). Though they had tried hard to escape from Greece they had never managed to do so, but had had to stay on and endure the hunted life of escaped soldiers. They heard of the British Mission from friendly Greeks and were gladly taken on the staff. They were pleased, too, to be back again in the company of their own soldiers— 'It was like being home again', Mutch said years after he had returned to New Zealand.

Edmonds moved his headquarters to Anatoli, which at an altitude of over 6500 feet is the highest village in Greece. Situated on the northern slopes of Mount Vardhousia, it looked out on a magnificent view of the Oiti, Giona and Vardhousia mountains. It also was near a first-class dropping ground and was close to ELAS headquarters. It was centrally situated for operations and yet was secure from attack, as the nearest road was six hours away. From here Edmonds and two of his staff made a reconnaissance of the Asopos viaduct.

Built on a gradient with a curve, the viaduct, 330 feet above the stream bed, was awe-inspiring in the way it spanned the sheer gorge. Its main arch had a span of 262 feet. On each side of the gorge the track disappeared into tunnels; the distance between them was 600 feet. The only approach was down narrow tracks leading over the tunnels. During the day the tracks were open and in full view of the garrison; at night the whole area was swept by searchlights and it was almost impossible to dodge the beams. But if an attacking party managed to get over this bottleneck of the narrow tracks, it would have plenty of room to spread out and so would be less vulnerable. Edmonds knew that a direct attack would be extremely difficult and dangerous. But it was by no means impossible. If the attack was planned properly and carried out resolutely by a well-armed force, it had a good chance of success.

**Two days after the reconnaissance the three sapper officers, Captains Pat Wingate and Keith Scott and Lieutenant Harry McIntyre, arrived at Anatoli. Myers also came to the headquarters to see Edmonds about the demolition of the viaduct. The Brigadier said that its destruction could not be put off any longer and that he personally would direct the whole operation. The actual demolition was to be left to Edmonds. After briefing the three sapper officers, Myers and Edmonds left for Mavrolitharion to finalise arrangements with Ares for Andarte support.**

**Before they reached Mavrolitharion the two officers received the disconcerting news that Ares had captured the Andarte leader, Colonel Psarros, and had ordered him and his band to join ELAS. Colonel Psarros' band was one of the few supported by the British, and Ares had broken his undertaking not to molest other approved and trustworthy Andarte forces. The Brigadier was upset by this sudden bad turn but could not move Ares. The breach of faith was flagrant and Myers had no option but to hit Ares where he felt it the most: he recommended to Middle East headquarters that all supplies to him be stopped. The situation was very delicate and required careful yet strong handling. Although the time was hardly opportune, Myers had several discussions with Ares about the destruction of the viaduct. Edmonds reports:**

**‘With the Brigadier I attended several conferences with Ares and often as we set off for his H.Q. we wondered what their outcome would be. On one occasion when we were prepared for a rough house as Ares appeared to be getting a bit desperate, on the Brigadier's orders I instructed a member of our party to call on us on some pretext an hour after the conference started, to see if all was well.’**

**In the end Ares agreed to take part in the attack on the viaduct. But he had not reckoned on the decision of the EAM Central Committee which ruled that its army, ELAS, was not to be used in the operation. It was useless for Myers and Edmonds to argue that there was a reasonable—if not good—chance of success. Many years after the event General**

**Sarafis, commander of ELAS, endeavoured to justify the decision:**

**‘Then he [Myers] spoke about the destruction of the Asopos bridge, which had been ordered by H.Q. Middle East. I explained that this could not be done because, in conformity with our instructions, we were in a state of complete strategic concentration as a precautionary measure against German and Italian mopping-up operations, and because such an action against Germans, who had fortified themselves with concrete artillery and machine-gun emplacements, barbed-wire entanglements, searchlights and ambushes, could have no hope of success unless at least 1,500 men were used, with artillery and machine guns, resources which ELAS did not possess.**

**Nor was a feint to distract the garrison and give the experts time to destroy the bridge likely to succeed, since the garrison covered the bridge with its fire; and moreover, reinforcements would come quickly from nearby garrisons before we could manage to carry out the work of demolition.... I explained that, as military commander of ELAS charged with the direction of operations, I was of the opinion that the action had no chance of success.... We stated that after discussion with the officers who had made the reconnaissance, we found the operation could have no chance of success.... Colonel Eddie [Brigadier Myers] did not agree with us, said that he considered the operation feasible.’**

**The special service agents at Edmonds' headquarters did not take the news kindly: ‘The first reaction of our party to the final news that ELAS would not take part in WASHINGTON was to curse wholeheartedly. The second was to refuse to admit that our plans were frustrated, and was expressed by each man by the words, “Let's damned well do it on our own.” ‘Stott and Captain Geoffrey Gordon-Creed, a British officer on the Mission staff, asked Edmonds if they could see Brigadier Myers and volunteer to do the sabotage by themselves. The Brigadier listened to them, then turned to Edmonds and asked him what the chances of success were. ‘The only way it could be done by stealth,’ Edmonds replied, ‘would be by following the stream down the gorge. That is, practically speaking, impossible and because the Germans regard it as impossible a**

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An hour later Gordon-Creed and Stott set off with George Karadjopoulos to reconnoitre the gorge. Edmonds was keen to take an active part in the actual demolition, but the Brigadier reminded him that he now had the responsibility of directing and co-ordinating all operations in his area and so was not free to go on any particular operation he liked. Edmonds, although disappointed, knew the truth of this and consoled himself with the thought that he would still be able to help the party from his headquarters.

The reconnaissance party was soon back with the report that they had been stopped by a sixty-foot waterfall a short distance inside the chasm. Ropes were needed to help the party through this and other obstacles. Gordon-Creed and Stott found that the gorge deserved its bad reputation, and they realised that it would take them days to reach the viaduct. For the most part the gorge was only a few yards wide, with sheer cliffs rising to a thousand feet above the stream. The sun never entered the gorge, and the only passage for most of the way was through the freezing cold water or along the steep cliff sides. The heartbreaking barriers were the waterfalls, with side walls worn smooth as glass, and the deep pools into which the water fell. Loose rocks from the cliff faces kept shooting down into the stream. In one place the gorge widened into a dry patch and this spot was selected as the camping place.

Every available piece of parachute rigging was collected and plaited into ropes thick enough to grasp; altogether there was about 340 feet of rope. On 21 May a fresh party of eight men left to make the attempt.

**Gordon-Creed was in command and Stott was the guide. The other members of the party were Morton, Scott, McIntyre, Wingate, Lockwood and Karadjopoulos. The following day the party reached the entry to the gorge. Stott led the way down to the first waterfall, where a dump was made of the stores and explosives. The men were exhausted from wading through the icy cold water, from climbing up and down the sides of the gorge, and by the heavy loads they carried. On 23 May Gordon-Creed and Stott left the party and climbed up the northern cliff face to see what lay ahead; the remainder rested, dried their clothes and prepared for the descent of the waterfall. The next day they continued their struggle and managed to reach the second main obstacle, another waterfall, before calling a halt. Progress on 24 May was again slow, and by the afternoon they were at a point midway between the second and a third waterfall, which they hoped was the last. The party halted for a day while another difficult reconnaissance was made by the indefatigable Stott from the northern clifftop.**

**The following day Stott and Morton went ahead and came back with the report that they had reached a third waterfall. It had a sheer drop of over forty feet, was about fifteen feet wide, and had perpendicular sides worn smooth by the water. All the rope had been used and further progress was impossible without its aid; also they wanted packs that could be carried on the head when they were forced to wade through deep water. It was feared also that it would be impossible to go beyond the third waterfall without the benefit of more reconnaissance work from both the north and south clifftops. So far they had not got within sight of the viaduct although they had gone a good two-thirds of the way down the gorge. The stores and explosives were carefully cached in a dry place and by 28 May the party was back at Edmonds' headquarters. 'When they returned to my headquarters (Edmonds wrote) their appearance told the tale of their hardships. Their knees were cut and bruised from scaling the falls, their clothes were torn and ragged and most of them looked worn and exhausted.'**

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On 15 June Stott, Mutch, and Khouri left Anatoli carrying heavy rucksacks packed with ropes, climbing irons, axes, a rope ladder and various other stores. The plan was for these three to force their way through the remainder of the gorge, and as soon as they had succeeded Stott would send a message for Gordon-Creed, McIntyre, and Scott to join them. Under Stott's direction the small party went about its task quickly and resolutely. 'Our first day,' writes Mutch, 'was spent in felling a tree about half a mile back and floating and pushing it down the river. The roar of the stream stopped the sound of the axe. The tree was about seventy feet long and had branches every three or four feet. After having it well tied back it was let over the waterfall and to our joy it reached the bottom with about three feet to spare at the top. The next day we swam the pool below the fall and got another four hundred yards.' The three men, strong and untiring, pushed on, often up to their necks in water, with Stott leading. Then, suddenly, 'Stott about a chain in front came back and said, "We have made it, the bridge is only another hundred yards in front."' 'Stott wrote out a message on the spot and, giving it to Mutch, told him to get back to Edmonds as quickly as

possible. Edmonds was delighted when he read the message. It read:

**‘I got down the big waterfall, found it was the last and suddenly when I rounded the bend I came face to face with “Mrs. Washing” herself. There was a lot of activity going on and workmen were swarming over the viaduct strengthening it to carry heavier loads and making a deuce of a din, rivetting I think. They have scaffolding erected all over it and ladders leading up from the bottom. I was taking all this in when I looked down at the stream and saw two workmen only about 10 yards away from me working with their heads down getting stones out of the stream. Luckily they didn't see me and I quickly got out of sight. These workmen come down from the railway line by some steps cut in the north cliff side, and we should be able to get up this way. Please send Geoff, Scotty and Mac immediately. The job's in the bag. I am going off on a recce of the road south of **Lamia** while the others are coming. Yours, Don.’**

### *Under the Viaduct*

**Gordon-Creed, Scott, and McIntyre left immediately and met the others inside the gorge on 18 June. They carried the explosives farther down the gorge, hid them and then made the climb back to their camp site, the only dry and level place where they could sleep. By the following afternoon they had carried all the stores to within striking distance of the viaduct. They waited for darkness, listening to the din of the rivetters above the roar of the stream. The cold was intense and almost unbearable; all they had on were shorts and rubber-soled shoes.**

**Night had well settled in when the men moved the explosives up to the northern base of the steel arch. They found that the wire entanglements had been folded back for the workmen and that ladders had been placed against the structure up to a platform. All this meant precious time saved. They looked up to the viaduct and saw in the moonlight the outline of a sentry with a rifle slung across his shoulder, pacing up and down. Fifty yards away from him was the guardhouse, with fifty more Germans ready to move at call.**

Scott and McIntyre climbed up to the platform, hauled up the charges on parachute cords and started fixing them. Gordon-Creed stood by the track which came down from the guardhouse to the stream. Although the guardhouse could not be seen, its position was fixed by the low mumble of the guards talking. The men tensed when they saw the red glow of a cigarette end above them. It came towards them. Gordon-Creed signalled the two sapper officers to keep quiet, then hid himself by the track. The glow came nearer and nearer, until finally Gordon-Creed could make out the figure of a German soldier. The saboteurs kept absolutely still; then as the German passed him, Gordon-Creed rose and hit him hard over the head with a piece of wood. The soldier dropped without a sound and fell over the edge of the path into the stream a hundred feet below. Gordon-Creed whispered to the sappers, 'Carry on. Be quick.'

When the work was well under way, Stott volunteered [*sic*] to go back up the gorge and reach a lookout point above the viaduct so that at dawn he could see the results of the demolition.

Shortly afterwards Mutch and Khouri started on the way back to get the two mules ready for a quick retreat. 'What a mad scramble it was swimming and climbing ropes,' writes Mutch. 'While going up one rope ladder my arms gave out on me and I fell back about twenty-five feet and knocked myself out and got a bad knock on the shin. I came to about fifteen minutes later hearing Khouri calling to me from the top in the darkness. After another couple of attempts I made it.'

Scott and McIntyre, the two sapper officers on the platform, worked quickly and silently. They were so keyed up that the sound of every move, no matter how slight, was magnified into an agonising clatter. Once a loose rivet fell, torturing the sappers with every sound it made. A searchlight came on and swung from one end of the viaduct to the other. The two hid their faces and hands and remained motionless while the beam passed over them, though they swore that the beam was fixed on them intentionally and that the eyes of all the garrison were looking

at them.

Just on midnight, after two hours' work, the sappers signalled Gordon-Creed that they had finished. Charges had been fixed to the four members of the arch and had been connected with rings of explosive fuse; this was duplicated to make sure that nothing went wrong. Five 'time pencils' were fixed to set off the charges; actually only one was required, but the sappers did not want to leave anything to chance. At midnight they crushed the 'time pencils'. In an hour and a half the acid would eat through the wire inside and the released spring would force the hammer down on to a cap which would detonate the charges. The two hurried down from the platform and joined Gordon-Creed. They took a last look at the viaduct and saw the sentry leaning idly over the handrail looking into space.

The three men set off up the gorge with all possible speed. The climb up the first waterfall was a nightmare. Although they were exhausted, they knew that they would have to force their bodies to the limit of endurance before they were clear of the gorge. For an hour they struggled and pulled themselves up through the dark chasm. From then on they kept looking at their watches every few minutes; the hour and a half, the time limit for the explosion, was nearly up. The time passed but there was no explosion. Another quarter of an hour passed. Surely, they thought, nothing could have gone wrong. In their minds they traced each step of the operation and tried to think of something they had missed. They knew the 'time pencils' were sensitive to temperature and that in a cool place the time limit could be extended by a quarter of the normal time. The minutes dragged on slowly. When their watches showed that one hour and fifty-five minutes had passed, the men stopped and wondered if they should go back to see what was wrong. Then all of a sudden a bright flash lit up the gorge. The men did not hear a sound: the roar of the stream was too deafening for any noise, no matter how great, to reach them. But they were sure that it was the explosion. As they stood in the water up to their waists they shook hands and congratulated one another. They had done the 'impossible'.

**Stott joined them next morning. He told them how at dawn he had looked down upon the viaduct from the top of the northern cliff and had seen the guards running around in great confusion. There was an empty space where the viaduct used to be.**

**The sappers left nothing near the viaduct which would lead the Germans to suspect that a British party had done the demolition. The commander of the garrison was called to account and was suspected of having sabotaged the viaduct himself. Then suspicion rested upon the workmen. The whole garrison was judged guilty of gross neglect of duty and the officer in charge and several others were promptly shot. It was not until five days later that the Germans found a rope ladder made of parachute cord, and so realised that a party of saboteurs had attacked through the gorge.**

**An expert engineer flew from [Germany](#) to supervise the reconstruction of the viaduct. He said he would have a new structure built within six weeks. With the help of fifty workmen he built two large concrete bases, and on these he placed steel towers to support the superstructure and reduce the length of span. Five weeks later he launched the almost completed framework of the superstructure across the gorge. As he was connecting the two portions together over the centre of the gorge, the whole framework crashed down on top of the wreckage of the original structure, taking the engineer and forty of his workmen with it. Another engineer took over and completed the task after the line had been cut for ten weeks.**

**The demolition of the Asopos viaduct was regarded as one of the best feats of sabotage in the war. Edmonds wanted to be sure that the members of the party got full credit for their work. Up to then he had never recommended anybody for an award, and not certain of the procedure, he signalled to [Cairo](#) a detailed account of the parts each had played and left it to the authorities to make the recommendations. A reply came back: 'Citations and recommendations urgently required.' While Edmonds was making out the citations he received a message from Brigadier Myers: 'Am not sure that the results have not earned a VC**

repeat VC. Do not hesitate if you agree.' As there was no doubt that Stott's performance was of an exceptionally high order, Edmonds had no hesitation in recommending him for the award of a VC. A few weeks later Edmonds met Myers and heard that both their lists of recommendations to Cairo tallied except in the case of Stott, whom Myers had recommended for a DSO. When Myers was given the full account of Stott's exploits, he immediately signalled to Cairo cancelling his recommendation and endorsing that of Edmonds. However, the award for Stott remained the DSO. Gordon-Creed was also awarded the DSO; Scott and McIntyre each received the MC; Mutch received the MM, and Khouri was awarded the bar to the same decoration.

## EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

### [SECTION]

**WHEN** the first sabotage party dropped into **Greece** with orders to blow up one of the three viaducts, it was suggested to them that if possible, and if conditions permitted, Asopos viaduct be the choice. As it turned out, an attack on this viaduct was beyond the party's strength, so it selected and destroyed the next most important, Gorgopotamos. But Asopos was too valuable a target to be left alone. In May 1943 Brigadier Myers thought that there were enough forces in the locality to carry out a successful attack on it. He instructed Captain Edmonds, who was now the liaison officer in charge of the area where the viaduct was, to start planning for the destruction of 'The Soapy One' (the old code-name for Asopos) and to arrange the details of the attacking force with Ares. Myers gave a new code-name, **WASHING**, to the proposed operation.

Three sapper officers were already on their way into **Greece** to assist with the demolition. Besides these, there were also a few soldiers on the Mission staff, and altogether they constituted an effective, though small, force. Among the New Zealanders was Lieutenant Don Stott <sup>5</sup> (5 Field Regiment) who was working with Colonel Psarros, leader of an Andarte band, in the Parnassos-Giona locality. Sergeant Bob Morton <sup>6</sup> ( **5 Field Regiment**) was with him. The two were inseparable—as a friend said, 'Wherever Don was, Bob wasn't far away.'—and they were reputedly the most daring and resourceful of the special service agents in **Greece**. Stott was an Artillery sergeant and Morton a gunner when they were captured at the end of the Greek campaign. They escaped by pole-vaulting over the prison wire in full daylight and under the heavy fire of the guards. Several Greeks chased them, not to catch them but to pat them on the back and to wish them the best of luck. Stott and Morton disguised themselves, obtained false passports and were often hunted by enemy patrols. At one stage Morton became sick, and the two had to hide for a long time in a village where there was a doctor. They sailed three times from **Greece** but bad weather forced them back each time.

After a first visit to **Athens** which nearly ended in capture, they managed to get in touch with the escape organisation and, within a short time, were back in Egypt. Both then became special service agents and went on several operations.

Other New Zealanders working with Edmonds were Pte Lou Northover <sup>7</sup> (19 Battalion), Corporal Dick Hooper <sup>8</sup> (I General Hospital), and Driver Charlie Mutch <sup>9</sup> (4 Reserve MT Company). Though they had tried hard to escape from **Greece** they had never managed to do so, but had had to stay on and endure the hunted life of escaped soldiers. They heard of the British Mission from friendly Greeks and were gladly taken on the staff. They were pleased, too, to be back again in the company of their own soldiers— 'It was like being home again', Mutch said years after he had returned to New Zealand.

Edmonds moved his headquarters to Anatoli, which at an altitude of over 6500 feet is the highest village in **Greece**. Situated on the northern slopes of Mount Vardhousia, it looked out on a magnificent view of the Oiti, Giona and Vardhousia mountains. It also was near a first-class dropping ground and was close to ELAS headquarters. It was centrally situated for operations and yet was secure from attack, as the nearest road was six hours away. From here Edmonds and two of his staff made a reconnaissance of the Asopos viaduct.

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The following day Stott and Morton went ahead and came back with the report that they had reached a third waterfall. It had a sheer drop of over forty feet, was about fifteen feet wide, and had perpendicular sides worn smooth by the water. All the rope had been used and further progress was impossible without its aid; also they wanted packs that could be carried on the head when they were forced to wade through deep water. It was feared also that it would be impossible to go beyond the third waterfall without the benefit of more reconnaissance work from both the north and south clifftops. So far they had not got within sight of the viaduct although they had gone a good two-thirds of the way down the gorge. The stores and explosives were carefully cached in a dry place and by 28 May the party was back at Edmonds' headquarters. 'When they returned to my headquarters (Edmonds wrote) their appearance told the tale of their hardships. Their knees were cut and bruised from scaling the falls, their clothes were torn and ragged and most of them looked worn and exhausted.'

While waiting for ropes, grappling irons, and other equipment from **Cairo**, the men were sent off to different areas to reconnoitre and select targets which were to be attacked by the Andartes in a general operation called **ANIMALS**. The purpose of the operation was to divert and occupy the enemy while the Allies landed in **Sicily**. Morton, who knew the **Athens** area well, was selected to go there on the important and hazardous assignment of surveying the aerodrome defences; this was the first step in a plan to destroy the planes on the ground. He was not back in time to be included in the party for the final assault on the viaduct, and Stott was deeply disappointed in not having his friend with him. Those who were to try again were Gordon-Creed, Stott, Scott, McIntyre, Mutch and Khouri. The first four had been on the previous attempt, but the last two were new to Asopos Gorge. Mutch, as mentioned before, was an escaped New Zealand soldier working at Edmonds' headquarters; Khouri, the Palestinian Arab soldier who had joined Myers' party when it landed in **Greece**, had already proved his worth in the fight at the Gorgopotamos viaduct.

On 15 June Stott, Mutch, and Khouri left Anatoli carrying heavy rucksacks packed with ropes, climbing irons, axes, a rope ladder and various other stores. The plan was for these three to force their way through the remainder of the gorge, and as soon as they had succeeded Stott would send a message for Gordon-Creed, McIntyre, and Scott to join them. Under Stott's direction the small party went about its task quickly and resolutely. 'Our first day,' writes Mutch, 'was spent in felling a tree about half a mile back and floating and pushing it down the river. The roar of the stream stopped the sound of the axe. The tree was about seventy feet long and had branches every three or four feet. After having it well tied back it was let over the waterfall and to our joy it reached the bottom with about three feet to spare at the top. The next day we swam the pool below the fall and got another four hundred yards.' The three men, strong and untiring, pushed on, often up to their necks in water, with Stott leading. Then, suddenly, 'Stott about a chain in front came back and said, "We have made it, the bridge is only another hundred yards in front."' 'Stott wrote out a message on the spot and,

**giving it to Mutch, told him to get back to Edmonds as quickly as possible. Edmonds was delighted when he read the message. It read:**

**'I got down the big waterfall, found it was the last and suddenly when I rounded the bend I came face to face with "Mrs. Washing" herself. There was a lot of activity going on and workmen were swarming over the viaduct strengthening it to carry heavier loads and making a deuce of a din, rivetting I think. They have scaffolding erected all over it and ladders leading up from the bottom. I was taking all this in when I looked down at the stream and saw two workmen only about 10 yards away from me working with their heads down getting stones out of the stream. Luckily they didn't see me and I quickly got out of sight. These workmen come down from the railway line by some steps cut in the north cliff side, and we should be able to get up this way. Please send Geoff, Scotty and Mac immediately. The job's in the bag. I am going off on a recce of the road south of [Lamia](#) while the others are coming. Yours, Don.'**

# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## UNDER THE VIADUCT

### *Under the Viaduct*

**Gordon-Creed, Scott, and McIntyre left immediately and met the others inside the gorge on 18 June. They carried the explosives farther down the gorge, hid them and then made the climb back to their camp site, the only dry and level place where they could sleep. By the following afternoon they had carried all the stores to within striking distance of the viaduct. They waited for darkness, listening to the din of the rivetters above the roar of the stream. The cold was intense and almost unbearable; all they had on were shorts and rubber-soled shoes.**

**Night had well settled in when the men moved the explosives up to the northern base of the steel arch. They found that the wire entanglements had been folded back for the workmen and that ladders had been placed against the structure up to a platform. All this meant precious time saved. They looked up to the viaduct and saw in the moonlight the outline of a sentry with a rifle slung across his shoulder, pacing up and down. Fifty yards away from him was the guardhouse, with fifty more Germans ready to move at call.**

**Scott and McIntyre climbed up to the platform, hauled up the charges on parachute cords and started fixing them. Gordon-Creed stood by the track which came down from the guardhouse to the stream. Although the guardhouse could not be seen, its position was fixed by the low mumble of the guards talking. The men tensed when they saw the red glow of a cigarette end above them. It came towards them. Gordon-Creed signalled the two sapper officers to keep quiet, then hid himself by the track. The glow came nearer and nearer, until finally Gordon-Creed could make out the figure of a German soldier. The saboteurs kept absolutely still; then as the German passed him, Gordon-Creed rose and hit him hard over the head with a piece of wood. The soldier dropped without a sound and fell over the edge of the path into the stream a**

hundred feet below. Gordon-Creed whispered to the sappers, 'Carry on. Be quick.'

When the work was well under way, Stott volunteered *[sic]* to go back up the gorge and reach a lookout point above the viaduct so that at dawn he could see the results of the demolition.

Shortly afterwards Mutch and Khouri started on the way back to get the two mules ready for a quick retreat. 'What a mad scramble it was swimming and climbing ropes,' writes Mutch. 'While going up one rope ladder my arms gave out on me and I fell back about twenty-five feet and knocked myself out and got a bad knock on the shin. I came to about fifteen minutes later hearing Khouri calling to me from the top in the darkness. After another couple of attempts I made it.'

Scott and McIntyre, the two sapper officers on the platform, worked quickly and silently. They were so keyed up that the sound of every move, no matter how slight, was magnified into an agonising clatter. Once a loose rivet fell, torturing the sappers with every sound it made. A searchlight came on and swung from one end of the viaduct to the other. The two hid their faces and hands and remained motionless while the beam passed over them, though they swore that the beam was fixed on them intentionally and that the eyes of all the garrison were looking at them.

Just on midnight, after two hours' work, the sappers signalled Gordon-Creed that they had finished. Charges had been fixed to the four members of the arch and had been connected with rings of explosive fuse; this was duplicated to make sure that nothing went wrong. Five 'time pencils' were fixed to set off the charges; actually only one was required, but the sappers did not want to leave anything to chance. At midnight they crushed the 'time pencils'. In an hour and a half the acid would eat through the wire inside and the released spring would force the hammer down on to a cap which would detonate the charges. The two hurried down from the platform and joined Gordon-Creed. They took a last look at the viaduct and saw the sentry leaning idly over the



**handrail looking into space.**

**The three men set off up the gorge with all possible speed. The climb up the first waterfall was a nightmare. Although they were exhausted, they knew that they would have to force their bodies to the limit of endurance before they were clear of the gorge. For an hour they struggled and pulled themselves up through the dark chasm. From then on they kept looking at their watches every few minutes; the hour and a half, the time limit for the explosion, was nearly up. The time passed but there was no explosion. Another quarter of an hour passed. Surely, they thought, nothing could have gone wrong. In their minds they traced each step of the operation and tried to think of something they had missed. They knew the 'time pencils' were sensitive to temperature and that in a cool place the time limit could be extended by a quarter of the normal time. The minutes dragged on slowly. When their watches showed that one hour and fifty-five minutes had passed, the men stopped and wondered if they should go back to see what was wrong. Then all of a sudden a bright flash lit up the gorge. The men did not hear a sound: the roar of the stream was too deafening for any noise, no matter how great, to reach them. But they were sure that it was the explosion. As they stood in the water up to their waists they shook hands and congratulated one another. They had done the 'impossible'. Stott joined them next morning. He told them how at dawn he had looked down upon the viaduct from the top of the northern cliff and had seen the guards running around in great confusion. There was an empty space where the viaduct used to be.**

**The sappers left nothing near the viaduct which would lead the Germans to suspect that a British party had done the demolition. The commander of the garrison was called to account and was suspected of having sabotaged the viaduct himself. Then suspicion rested upon the workmen. The whole garrison was judged guilty of gross neglect of duty and the officer in charge and several others were promptly shot. It was not until five days later that the Germans found a rope ladder made of parachute cord, and so realised that a party of saboteurs had attacked**

through the gorge.

An expert engineer flew from **Germany** to supervise the reconstruction of the viaduct. He said he would have a new structure built within six weeks. With the help of fifty workmen he built two large concrete bases, and on these he placed steel towers to support the superstructure and reduce the length of span. Five weeks later he launched the almost completed framework of the superstructure across the gorge. As he was connecting the two portions together over the centre of the gorge, the whole framework crashed down on top of the wreckage of the original structure, taking the engineer and forty of his workmen with it. Another engineer took over and completed the task after the line had been cut for ten weeks.

The demolition of the Asopos viaduct was regarded as one of the best feats of sabotage in the war. Edmonds wanted to be sure that the members of the party got full credit for their work. Up to then he had never recommended anybody for an award, and not certain of the procedure, he signalled to **Cairo** a detailed account of the parts each had played and left it to the authorities to make the recommendations. A reply came back: 'Citations and recommendations urgently required.' While Edmonds was making out the citations he received a message from Brigadier Myers: 'Am not sure that the results have not earned a VC repeat VC. Do not hesitate if you agree.' As there was no doubt that Stott's performance was of an exceptionally high order, Edmonds had no hesitation in recommending him for the award of a VC. A few weeks later Edmonds met Myers and heard that both their lists of recommendations to **Cairo** tallied except in the case of Stott, whom Myers had recommended for a DSO. When Myers was given the full account of Stott's exploits, he immediately signalled to **Cairo** cancelling his recommendation and endorsing that of Edmonds. However, the award for Stott remained the DSO. Gordon-Creed was also awarded the DSO; Scott and McIntyre each received the MC; Mutch received the MM, and Khouri was awarded the bar to the same decoration.

# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

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**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

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# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## APPENDIX I – STOTT AND MORTON

### *Appendix I*

#### *Stott and Morton*

**AT the beginning of October 1943 Stott and Morton were ordered to organise sabotage attempts on German aircraft on the Tatoi, Kalamaki, Megara and Elefsis airfields. The Germans, however, attacked the party's secret headquarters, and the men had to scatter quickly without even time to save their stores of ammunition and explosives. Stott and Morton then led their small party into Athens by hard marching, relieved at one stage by commandeering a lorry at pistol point. They spent a week reconnoitring the neighbouring aerodromes and decided that it was not the time to attack: the party's stores had vanished, the German guards had increased and were more alert, and there were no inside agents to help. Stott and Morton then started building up an efficient network of agents who would help them when the time was ready.**

**While Stott was in Athens a representative of the Quisling mayor told him that the Germans wanted to meet him and discuss a local peace proposal for Greece. At first Stott refused to meet them, but later changed his mind as he thought a lot of useful information could be obtained. When Mutch was in the Gestapo prison at Salonika \* he heard from Stott's interpreter, who was also imprisoned there, how Stott met the Germans in Athens:**

**‘A German general and a high up Gestapo official called at the Mayor of Athens house and asked him if he could get someone to go to the guerrilla area and get one of the British officers to come and meet them about something of vital importance to Greece. At that time Don Stott was in Athens. He told the Mayor to tell the Germans in a week's time that a British officer would meet them two days later at the corner by**

the gardens at the foot of University Street at dusk. On the day Don in full British uniform with Bob Morton and a Greek in civvies, with tommy guns under their overcoats, walked down the road to the meeting place. On the way he was saluted by German soldiers. There was a group of four at the meeting place. They held up and took a general, called a taxi and told the others that if Don wasn't back somewhere in one hour, the general would pay the penalty.'

The man who Stott met was Colonel Loss, Chief of the **Gestapo** in South-East Europe. The conference took longer than was expected and Loss had to go away in the middle of it to consult his superior, Noebacher. The end came when Loss said he would have to go to **Berlin** for further instructions and more authority. He arranged to see Stott again on his return. Mutch said that **Germany's** Foreign Minister, Ribbentrop, was in **Athens** that day but this cannot be confirmed.

The mayor's house was given the status of neutral territory and Stott's safety was guaranteed. But Stott wanted to look at the defences round the **Corinth Canal**, so he persuaded the Germans, on the pretext of having to get a message to **Cairo**, to take him by car to **Corinth** and thence by caique across the Gulf of Dobraina. He went into the hills to a secret wireless station, found the set out of order, returned to the German escort and came back to **Athens**. On this conducted trip Stott took particular note of the roads, railways, and defences around the canal. The information was useful later when British planes attacked enemy installations in the area.

On 21 November Loss came back from **Berlin** and asked Stott to return to **Cairo** with 'agreement feelers' for a local peace in **Greece**. Stott agreed to do this. He chartered a caique in which he hid several people who wanted to escape from **Greece**, but unfortunately the engine broke down and he had to use another boat. On 23 November he left **Greece**, reaching Chios the following day. The German commander of the island was very courteous and arranged Stott's move into **Turkey**, and he arrived in **Cairo** a few days later. Nothing is known of what happened to the peace overtures. No doubt they were rejected on the spot by the

**British.**

**It is not known what the authorities thought of Stott's action in negotiating with the Germans. Two special service agents, both New Zealanders, who know of the incident, say that when the British authorities heard of the negotiations they immediately cancelled them. This version is also mentioned by Colonel C. M. Woodhouse in his book on Greek politics, *Apple of Discord*:**

**‘Capt. Stott, a New Zealand officer, entered **Athens** in the autumn of 1943 to carry out sabotage. His courage and originality soon involved him in other, far more perilous, activities, in the process of which his political associations were largely of the extreme right. One of them was Gen. Papagos, Chief of the General Staff of the Greek Army under Metaxas in 1940-1; another, far less inoffensive, was the Mayor of **Athens** installed by the Germans. Through the latter he found himself entering into negotiations of a complicated nature with the German occupation authorities. These communications were abruptly severed when they came to the notice of higher British authorities, who had not at first understood their gravity.’**

**On the other hand, Stott was officially commended for what he did and was awarded a bar to his DSO. This account is taken mostly from the citation to the decoration; there is no other official source of information. It would appear that the results of Stott's initiative and courage in these almost fantastic happenings were of considerable value to the Allies.**

### ***Operation in Borneo***

**In 1944 Stott and Morton were seconded to the Australian Army for special service work in the **Pacific**. On 20 March 1945 Stott and a small party were taken by submarine to a point off Balikpapan, **Borneo**, where they were to land and make a reconnaissance for the projected landing of Australian forces. Stott was in one of the two rubber dinghies—the first section of the party—which left the submarine. The dinghies**

became separated and this was the last that was seen of him. Immediately after the end of the war in the **Pacific** a search party questioned the natives and the Japanese in the locality but none had ever seen or heard of him. All the evidence indicated that he did not land but must have been drowned on the night he left the submarine.

Morton landed on 22 March and took over leadership of the party, now numbering eight. The Japanese knew that they were ashore and sent strong forces to capture them. For the next six weeks Morton carried out his reconnaissance in spite of being constantly pursued by the Japanese. On one occasion his party successfully fought a pitched battle with a large enemy force. In May he managed to buy an old boat from the natives, and in it he and the remainder of his party sailed for several hundred miles before being picked up by a passing plane.

Morton was awarded the MC. The last part of the citation to his award reads: 'Although costly, this operation resulted in a vast amount of reliable intelligence being obtained which proved of great value in the subsequent landing.'

---

\* Mutch was recaptured on Chios Island in November 1943 while en route to Egypt for return to New Zealand on furlough.

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# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## [SECTION]

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# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

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# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## APPENDIX II

### *Appendix II*

**THE names of other New Zealanders who were special service agents in Greece, but who have not been mentioned in this narrative, are given below:**

**Lt-Col J. Mulgan, MC (British Army); died in Cairo in 1945.**

**Lt W. A. Hubbard (Divisional Cavalry); killed by ELAS guerrillas in October 1943.**

**WO II J. A. Redpath, MM ( 19 Army Troops Company).**

**Major J. W. C. Craig, MC and bar (22 Battalion).**

**Major A. H. Empson, MM (18 Battalion); died of sickness in Greece on 6 April 1946.**

**Capt D. G. MacNab, MC, DCM ( 6 Field Company).**

# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

### *BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES*

<sup>1</sup>Brig F. M. H. Hanson, DSO and bar, OBE, MM, m.i.d.; **Wellington**; born **Levin**, 1896; resident engineer Main Highways Board; Wellington Regt in First World War; commanded **7 Fd Coy**, NZE, Jan 1940- Aug 1941; CRE 2 NZ Div May 1941, Oct 1941-Apr 1944, Nov 1944-Jan 1946; Chief Engineer, **2 NZEF**, 1943-46; wounded three times; Deputy Commissioner of Works.

<sup>2</sup>Lt-Col C. E. Barnes, DSO, MC, m.i.d.; born NZ 30 Jan 1907; civil engineer; killed in accident, **Australia**, 22 Jun 1952.

<sup>3</sup>Lt-Col A. Edmonds, MC, m.i.d.; **Putaruru**; born NZ 10 Jan 1915; civil engineer.

<sup>4</sup>Maj W. S. Jordan, MBE, MC, m.i.d.; Victoria, **Australia**; born **Timaru**, 20 Nov 1909; journalist.

<sup>5</sup>Maj D. J. Stott, DSO and bar; born NZ 23 Oct 1915; rotary machinist; drowned, **Borneo**, 20 Mar 1945.

<sup>6</sup>Capt R. M. Morton, MC, DCM; Nyasaland, South Africa; born NZ 3 Mar 1919; clerk.

<sup>7</sup>WO II L. N. Northover, MM; **Wanganui**; born NZ 19 May 1916; labourer.

<sup>8</sup>Sgt R. A. Hooper, MM; Greenmeadows; born NZ 8 Sep 1916; draper.

<sup>9</sup>Sgt C. Mutch, MM; Otahuhu; born **Scotland**, 8 Feb 1909; slaughterman.

# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

[BACKMATTER]

**THE AUTHOR, M. B. McGlynn, who is on the staff of the War History Branch, served in the Middle East and in Italy with NZ Supply Company. He graduated in Commerce at Victoria University College in 1940.**

# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## SOURCES

### SOURCES

INFORMATION on the Gorgopotamos and Asopos operations was drawn from Lt-Col Edmonds' manuscript *With the Greek Guerrillas 1942-1944*. Edmonds' generous action of placing his manuscript at the disposal of **War History Branch** is gratefully acknowledged. The reports of the late Lt-Col C. E. Barnes on his special service work in **Greece** were used for material on the Gorgopotamos operation. Acknowledgments are also made to Mrs. D. Morton and to C. Mutch, R. A. Hooper, D. G. MacNab, J. A. Redpath and K. Simcock for letters and personal interviews.

The following books were read for information on the Greek Resistance movement:

*We Fell Among Greeks*, Denys Hamson, Jonathan Cape, **London**, 1946

*Apple of Discord*, C. M. Woodhouse, Hutchinson, **London**, 1948

*Report on Experience*, John Mulgan, **Oxford University Press**, **London**, 1947

*Eight Years Overseas*, Field Marshal Lord Wilson of **Libya**, Hutchinson, **London**, 1948

*Closing the Ring*, Winston S. Churchill, Houghton Mifflin, **Boston**, 1951

*Greek Resistance Army*. S. Sarafis (Translated by M. Pascoe), Birch Books, **London**, 1951

*The Greek Dilemma*, W. H. McNeill, Lippincott, **New York**, 1947

The following articles in New Zealand magazines were consulted:

**H. McD. Vincent, 'Zed Boys for the Zero Hours' in *RSA Review*, January 1952.**

**D. G. MacNab, 'Salute to Colonel Bill', *Review*, August 1952.**

**W. S. Jordan, 'Fought Nazis and Reds for Freedom of Greeks', *Weekly News*, [Auckland](#), 9 July 1952.**

**A Grand Saboteur', *New Zealand Free Lanc*, 15 January 1947.**



# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

### *ACKNOWLEDGMENTS*

**THE MAPS** arc by L. D. McCormick. The photographs come from various collections which are stated where they are known:

*D. G. MacNab* Cover, page 14 ( top) and page 18 ( bottom)

*Alan Mulgan* page 13 ( top), page 18 ( top right), page 18 ( top), and page 20 ( top)

*The New Zealand Herald* page 13 ( bottom)

*A. Edmonds* page 14 ( bottom), pages 15, 16, 17 and 18 ( top left)

*British Official* page 19 ( bottom)

*Mrs. A. Stott* page 20 ( bottom left)

*Mrs. D. Morton* page 20 ( bottom right)

# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## [BACKMATTER]

THE TYPE USED THROUGHOUT THE SERIES IS *Aldine Bembo* WHICH WAS REVIVED FOR MONOTYPE  
FROM A RARE BOOK PRINTED BY ALDUS IN 1495 \* THE TEXT IS SET IN 12 POINT ON A BODY OF 14 POINT

# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## POINT 175: THE BATTLE OF SUNDAY OF THE DEAD

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**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

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**[editorpage] p. 2**

# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## [COVERS]

NEW ZEALAND IN THE SECOND WORLD WAR  
1942-1945



Point 175

THE BATTLE OF SUMMIT OF THE DEAD

Author: W. E. MURPHY  
Editor: W. E. MURPHY  
Illustrations: W. E. MURPHY  
Design: W. E. MURPHY  
Typeset: W. E. MURPHY  
Printed: W. E. MURPHY  
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Point 175

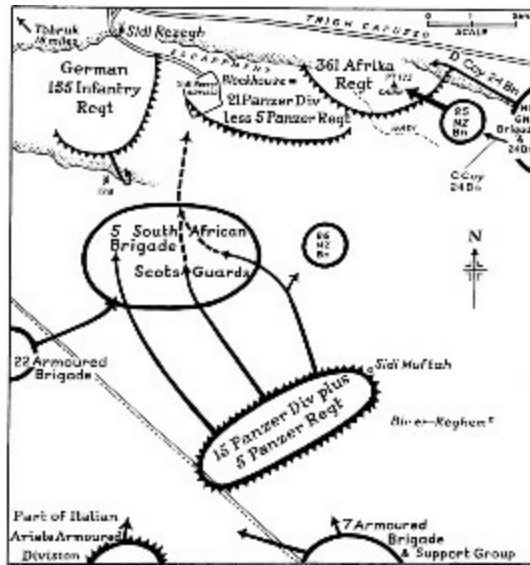
THE BATTLE OF SUMMIT OF THE DEAD

W. E. MURPHY

W. E. MURPHY  
DEPARTMENT OF INTERNAL AFFAIRS  
WELLINGTON, NEW ZEALAND

# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## [FRONTISPIECE]



COVER PHOTOGRAPH *Shells bursting near Point 175*

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**[TITLE PAGE]**

**Point 175**

***THE BATTLE OF SUNDAY OF THE DEAD***

**W. E. Murphy**

**WAR HISTORY BRANCH**

**DEPARTMENT OF INTERNAL AFFAIRS WELLINGTON, NEW ZEALAND**

**1954**

# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

[EDITORPAGE]

**THE operation here described was one of the stiffest in which New Zealand troops have ever been engaged. In broad daylight, on open ground giving every advantage to a determined and skilful defence, the infantry companies engaged took their objective and, despite very severe losses, held it against fierce counter-attacks. They were gallantly and skilfully supported by an entirely inadequate number of guns and tanks, but in the main they had to rely on their own weapons, and they showed what resolute troops can do.**

**It is always extremely difficult to discover what has actually happened in hard infantry fighting. This action has been most closely studied, the evidence (mostly contemporary) of over sixty participants examined; the story is given mostly in their own words, and it is believed to be authentic. There are few more completely truthful accounts in military history.**

**Usually in battle there are some for whom the strain is too much. It is interesting and impressive to note how well and gallantly everyone in this combat seems to have behaved. If there had been any failure it would have been mentioned or at least hinted at, but there is no suggestion of any in these candid letters and diaries. It is often said that the spirit of our troops was never higher than in the Libyan campaign of 1941, and this account goes far to confirm that opinion.**

**It is worth reading and thinking over.**

**H. K. KIPPENBERGER**

,  
*Major-General*  
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF





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**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

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## SOURCES

### *SOURCES*

**WAR DIARIES and other official documents have provided the framework only; this account has been prepared chiefly from interviews and correspondence with dozens of men who took part in the action. Where their contributions have been directly quoted the author's debt to them is explicit. Among others whose help has not thus been acknowledged are: B. Campbell, J. V. Elliott, K. B. Neilsen, L. M. Nelley, F. R. Porter, R. S. Tappin, T. G. Taylor, G. Thomason, R. T. K. Thomson, and D. A. Walton. Colonels H. G. Burton and G. J. McNaught have been particularly helpful.**

# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

**THE MAPS are by L. D. McCormick. The photographs come from various collections which are stated where they are known:**

***S. Lyle-Smythe* Cover and **page 32 (top)****

**New Zealand Army Official, *W. Timmins* **page 15****

***G.J. McNaught* **page 16 (top)****

***R. Arundel* **page 16 (bottom)****

***W. R. A. Shakespear* **page 17 (top) and page 32 (bottom)****

***J. B. Hardcastle* **page 17 (bottom)****

***A. C. W. Mantell-Harding* **page 18 (top)****

***C. H. Cathie* **page 18 (centre)****

***K. B. Neilsen* **page 18 (bottom)****

**New Zealand Army Official **page 31****

# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## [BACKMATTER]

**THE AUTHOR, W. E. Murphy, who is on the staff of the War History Branch, served throughout the war in the New Zealand Artillery in the Mediterranean theatre. He graduated BA at Victoria University College in 1952.**

# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## [BACKMATTER]

THE TYPE USED THROUGHOUT THE SERIES IS *Aldine Bembo* WHICH WAS REVIVED FOR MONOTYPE FROM A RARE BOOK PRINTED BY ALDUS IN 1495 \* THE TEXT IS SET IN 12 POINT ON A BODY OF 14 POINT

# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## ESCAPES

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NEW ZEALAND IN THE SECOND WORLD WAR  
*Official History*



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## Escapes

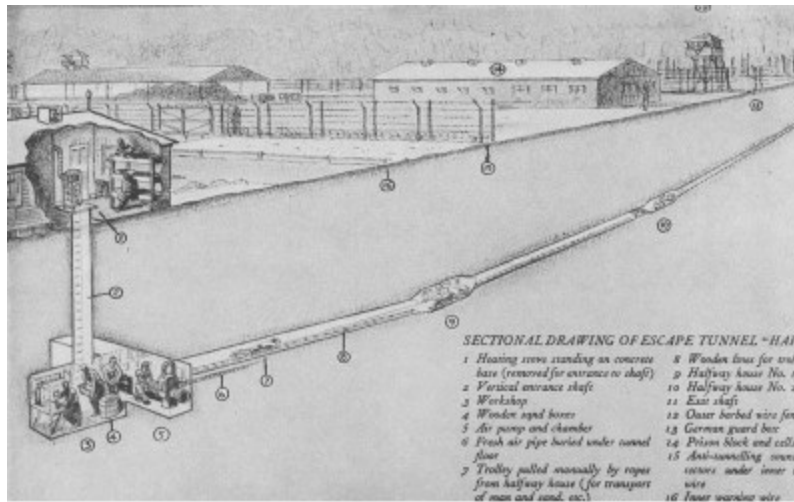
by

D. O. W. HALL

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DEPARTMENT OF INTERNAL AFFAIRS  
WELLINGTON, NEW ZEALAND

# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## [FRONTISPIECE]



THE LUFT THREE TUNNEL

Drawing by Ley Kenyon from *Escape to Danger* by Paul Beckhill and Conrad Norton

### COVER PHOTOGRAPH

**A digger at work in the escape tunnel of Stalag Luft III**  
**Drawing by Ley Kenyon**

**EPIISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2**

**[TITLE PAGE]**

**Escapes**

**D. O. W. HALL**

**WAR HISTORY BRANCH**

**DEPARTMENT OF INTERNAL AFFAIRS WELLINGTON, NEW ZEALAND**

**1954**

# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

[EDITORPAGE]

**DURING** World War II over 9000 New Zealanders became prisoners of war. Of these 718 made successful escapes, 236 from German hands, 480 from the Italians and 2 from the Japanese. Several have recounted their experiences in published books. Many equally remarkable exploits are recorded only in the reports held by the **War History Branch**.

This final number of the Episodes and Studies series is a survey of the whole field. It could have been a work of immense length and yet of very great interest.

The author has asked me to acknowledge, on his behalf, his indebtedness to Mr W. Wynne Mason, the author of *Prisoners of War*, a volume of the Official History series, 'whose research was my primary source.'

**H. K. KIPPENBERGER**

,  
*Major-General*  
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

NEW ZEALAND WAR HISTORIES

# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

### *Acknowledgments*

**THE DRAWINGS** by Ley Kenyon (cover and inside cover) are used by permission of the publishers, **Faber & Faber**, and the sketch of Shamshuipo Camp by permission of the publishers, Arthur Barker, both of **London**. The photographs come from various collections which are stated when they are known:

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*J. H. Ledgerwood* page 15 ( centre), page 17 ( top right)

*J. McDevitt* page 16( top left)

*Peter McIntyre* page 16 ( bottom left and right)

*James Reid* page 17 ( bottom centre)

New Zealand Army Official, *W. A. Brodie* page 17 ( bottom right)

*D.J. Gibbs* page 18 ( top left)

*P. W. Bates* page 18 ( top right)

*T. G. Bedding* page 18 ( centre left)

*E. R. Silverwood* page 18 ( centre right)

# EPIISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## TO ESCAPE

## *To Escape*

**PRISONERS of war are exhorted to escape. <sup>1</sup> That advice is perhaps too categorical as circumstances alter cases. Who would recommend the prisoner in **Japan** to escape? Yet even in **Japan** the prisoner needed to be guarded. The vigilance that had to be maintained to guard prisoners caused a perceptible drain on the enemy's manpower, and every successful escape from camp in **Italy** or **Germany** harassed the enemy, obliging him to keep up a wasteful system of guards, special police, and the constant checking of personal papers that helped to diminish his own war potential. Of an unsuccessful escape a prisoner wrote consolingly, 'The principle was to provide annoyance to the enemy and occupy his garrison reserves'.**

**The principle was also to occupy the minds of the prisoners themselves, for few had settled down willingly to the dreary occupation of being a prisoner of war, and all found the humiliation and boredom of prison life oppressive. Many men dallied with the idea of escaping. Escapes— successful, failed, or future—had the strongest moral effect on everybody inside a prison camp. The idea that they could at some time escape was a great enhancement of prisoners' self-esteem. It was the principal means open to them (apart from direct sabotage and going slow on working parties, the former a matter of opportunity, the latter a routine) of actively returning to the struggle against the enemy. With any man who got away went the thoughts and aspirations of the much larger number who had to stay behind. Successful escapes bolstered morale.**

**Some men were persistent and determined escapers. Prowess in this field of action did not always coincide with outstanding fighting ability, but often the two qualities were closely associated in the same person. An astonishing number of men escaped several times; these prisoners gave their whole minds to the problems of organising escapes, were alert to seize every opportunity and, if necessary, to create them. Some men escaped for negative reasons: their overwhelming hatred of prison life.**

**Others escaped from a sense of adventure, some from a sense of duty**

**The enemy, too, had to spend a great deal of thought and energy in dealing with escapes and minimising the possibility of their occurrence. The German camps were surrounded by formidable barriers of barbed wire, with sentries in observation towers equipped with searchlights. In **Italy** some camps were located in fortresses or old and massive buildings eminently suitable for use as prisons; the camps in the open were all as well defended as those in **Germany**. Fences, guards, sentries, roll calls, unannounced searches of prisoners' quarters and property were all used by the stronger side against the weaker in a never-ending battle of wits in which the race did not invariably go to the swift, nor the battle automatically to the strong. For it was the prisoners who held the initiative, and no amount of clairvoyance or thoroughness on the part of the captors could prevent the captives from finding out the weaknesses in the system designed to keep them securely incarcerated. They accepted the challenge presented to them by the fact of their captivity.**

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**<sup>1</sup> Section 53 of the Army Act makes it a military offence not to rejoin HM Forces if it is in one's power to do so.**

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# EPIISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## ESCAPE ORGANISATION

## *Escape Organisation*

**IN many camps escape committees were set up with the express object of providing would-be escapers with the materials and information they needed. In officers' camps the senior British officer's permission was usually obtained before an escape was undertaken. Senior officers were concerned to see that the attempt would be reasonably likely to succeed, not a futile gesture which would only provoke the enemy, and also that it should not prejudice the success of other parties. Cases occurred where the same device for getting out of camp was hit upon almost simultaneously and quite independently by different parties, and its use by one would obviously make it impossible for a second party to use the same means.**

**The actual organisation varied from camp to camp. In some the committee rigidly controlled escapes, equipping the escapers from a pool of materials collected from everybody in the camp. Nobody was allowed to make an attempt until he was perfectly equipped and thoroughly briefed with all information that he needed. In others it was little more than a discussion club. In many camps those who had escape materials in their possession—clothes, compasses, maps—preferred to hold them in case they themselves should later wish to make an attempt; some would part with these articles only in exchange for money (unselfishness was not universal in prison camps: conditions of strain may bring out the worst as well as the best in men). Some escape committees were indefatigable, collating information about trains, passes, permits, and the thousand and one other details of civilian life in an enemy country in time of war which had to be known by escapers; coaching every aspiring escaper in the best way to cope with every imaginable contingency; teaching appropriate phrases of the enemy language to those who were unfamiliar with it. Every frustrated escaper was eagerly questioned when he came back to camp, and the lessons of his failure taken to heart. The information inside any camp about conditions outside might not always be accurate. For instance, in some Austrian camps in September 1943 the prisoners who had just been brought from**

**Italy** believed that the Italian population was hostile to escaped British prisoners of war. In some camps the members of escape committees found it prudent to keep their mouths shut and revealed their projects only to the chosen few lest careless talk should betray them.

A number of prisoners found fulfilment for their own aspirations in unselfishly forwarding the escapes of others. Among these men were the expert forgers of passports, and the tailors who made up blankets or other improvised materials into passable imitations of civilian clothes. A Zealand major (Neill Rattray <sup>1</sup>) was commended for his 'tact, patience, initiative and above all an optimistic outlook' <sup>2</sup> as secretary of escape committees in successive prison camps in **Germany**. Optimism indeed was essential: 'The only way is to plan the escape, weigh the odds in its favour, convince yourself it will be successful, and then, while you are enthusiastic and confident, go before you examine it too closely and discover that it is really completely crazy.' <sup>3</sup>

At one of the moments of greatest importance in the conduct of an escape, the actual passing out of camp, the co-operation of other prisoners was often essential. A diversion to attract attention elsewhere while the escapers found their way out might be needed. Officers sometimes changed identities with men so that they could go out on working parties and thus have a chance to get away. (Once identities had been changed, the deception had to be persevered in or both would be punished. Each had to receive and write the other's letters, at times a source of bewilderment to relatives.) An excuse made for absence from a roll call might mean the postponement for a number of hours of the guards' discovery that an escape had occurred. In some cases the assistance was direct, lowering men on ropes out of windows or engaging an essential guard in conversation at a vital moment. Few escapers gained their freedom without a good deal of assistance from fellow prisoners of war inside the camp. While it is just to praise the skill and daring of the men who actually got away, it is important to remember the ungrudging help of the others who remained behind (for all could not go), which very often alone made possible the most spectacular

successes. Escaping required teamwork, and it benefited by responsible direction.

---

<sup>1</sup> Maj N. A. Rattray, MBE; Waimate, born **Dunedin**, 7 Nov 1896; farmer; p.w. Apr 1941.

<sup>2</sup> *South to Freedom*, Hon. T. C. F. Prittie and W. Earle Edwards (Hutchinson), p. 320.

<sup>3</sup> *Life Without Ladies*, Colin Armstrong ( **Whitcombe and Tombs**), p. 46.

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# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## ESCAPE EQUIPMENT

## *Escape Equipment*

**AN** escaper's equipment was obviously limited in bulk. He could take a pack with him but not one of conspicuous size. Thus it was rarely possible for him to carry much more than ten days' food, and his need to replenish the supply when it ran out would lead to a crisis in his career of freedom. Some escapers tried to make their food last them longer by preparing especially rich mixtures from the most concentrated of the foodstuffs in their **Red Cross** parcels: 'escape cake' might consist of condensed milk, sugar, ovaltine, and margarine or butter, welded into one glorious mixture which contained in the smallest bulk the highest calorific value. In any case the most concentrated foods, chocolate particularly, were religiously saved up from **Red Cross** parcels in spite of the care with which the guards, both in **Italy** and **Germany**, tried to prevent the accumulation of reserves. Months before his attempt, every would-be escaper had become an expert in hiding what he did not wish to be discovered, food as well as other escape materials. The rafters and the linings of huts were favourite hiding places, but no place was absolutely secure; the adroit could shift their gear almost from under the noses of searching guards.

Next to food the most pressing need of the escaper was civilian clothing. In his own uniform he was immediately conspicuous among civilians. Clothes were made up inside the camp by expert or amateur tailors whose work with blankets and portions of uniform, aided by the judicious use of dyes, would have amazed their mothers and wives. Materials brought into camp for amateur theatricals often gave these tailors an extra source of supply. Men out on working parties picked up clothing from civilians by barter, the cigarettes, soap, and chocolate out of **Red Cross** parcels being more valuable than currency.

To get out of camp, tools such as wire-cutters or files might be needed. These were hard to come by, and it was practically impossible to get them in a parcel. They were nearly always acquired by barter or by theft.

Escapers who intended to make their own way without reliance on outside help needed maps and a compass. A few maps had been obtained by fair means or foul in most prison camps. They might be obsolete or on too small a scale to be of much value, but they were better than nothing and were closely copied by aspiring escapers. The map would be traced on tissue paper and retraced onto a finer fabric. An issue silk map could easily be hidden, for instance inside a coloured handkerchief. Compasses were difficult to acquire in a prison camp, but with a magnet crude ones could be made, an advantage of the home-made compass being that it was small and easily hidden, for instance, inside a cake of soap or in the top of a fountain pen. It was harder to keep the larger, ordinary army-issue compass through a series of rigorous searches, though some succeeded in this.

Most escapers felt they needed money. In Italy the practice of issuing special 'camp lire' made it impossible to accumulate money, except illicitly by selling valuables to guards or civilians. In **Germany** it was easier to accumulate a supply of marks, as guards were more readily corrupted. Again the escaper's real capital was his personal possessions: watches, cigarette cases, spare clothing were all sold or bartered to provide funds. Currency could be hidden in spite of the enemy's eagerness to inspect all types of paper; it was possible to make bank notes into the lining of a tie.

The escaper had to have personal papers if he was to mingle with the civilian population, more especially as identity papers are always carried in normal times by the citizens of most continental countries. Many escapers who could not produce them came to grief. It was almost impossible to travel by train in **Germany** without identity papers that had to be a good enough imitation to pass even a close scrutiny. In **Germany**, unless the escaper was an accomplished linguist, the best papers to copy were those of some foreign worker. The Reich was full of Belgians, Czechs, Poles, and several other nationalities, most of whom were working for the Germans under greater or less degrees of duress, but who had some freedom of movement. In many camps genuine papers

had been acquired; even though cameras and photographic materials were forbidden, photographs were specially taken and affixed, or photographs of men in uniform were cleverly retouched to change uniform to civilian clothing. Even the official stamps on these documents were imitated by devoted draughtsmen or reproduced on pieces of rubber salvaged from old shoes. Occasionally prisoners of war acquired the correct blank forms of passes and identity cards; they had still to fill in the names and affix the photographs and the correct stamps. The forger's patient art would have to be invoked again to provide permits to travel and other supporting papers. Amazing work was done by these artists; typewriting was imitated perfectly by freehand drawing, and a single pass might take a month to prepare. A difficulty was that papers such as permits to travel had to be stamped with a recent date, and were for limited duration only, and once the escaper had made up his mind for a particular date he was committed to it. The major difficulty remained: that of acting the part set by the false documents carried. Many promising escapes struck on this rock.



# EPIISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## OUTSIDE HELP

## *Outside Help*

**ALTHOUGH** only a small proportion of escapers had friends outside before they escaped or any outside help arranged beforehand, few escapes succeeded without a great deal of help from sympathisers in the enemy country itself. Some of the help was involuntary; the friendship of guards was cultivated (the contents of **Red Cross** parcels, as happened in so many different departments of prisoner-of-war life, were admirable bargaining weapons), and they were induced to bring into camp much that was essential for escapers, from the inks and dyes needed for forging papers or altering clothes to the currency of the enemy country. In Italy before the armistice of September 1943, few Italians had dared to help escaped prisoners, but after the armistice the help given them by the Italian people was on a vast scale. In Germany the numerous bodies of foreign workers were largely hostile to the Germans: with them it was a question of risk, and an escaped prisoner had to be helped without acute danger to the helper. This in part made up for the hostility of the German people as a whole, for most Germans would always surrender or betray an escaped prisoner.

In Greece and in **Crete** the chances of help were very good. Only a small number of Greeks, sometimes men of substance whose possessions were in jeopardy from the Germans or Italians, were hostile to the escapers. On the other hand Greek help might not be unlimited, and it was given or withheld much more capriciously than in **Italy** after the armistice. In Bulgaria the people as well as their rulers were pro-Axis. A story was circulated in **Greece** that three English prisoners of war who jumped off a train going to **Germany** had been beheaded by the Bulgarians; although this story cannot be authenticated, Bulgarian spite is otherwise corroborated. **Hungary** provided comfortable conditions of internment and some private sympathy, and the Yugoslav underground in **Austria** helped prisoners to escape.

# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## TYPES OF ESCAPE

## *Types of Escape*

**AN escape is better defined as the complete journey from a prison camp to ultimate freedom than as the initial evasion from enemy hands. For the escaper perhaps the most dramatic moment was the exit from the camp itself. Months of observant study were needed to decide how to get out; an assiduous but unobtrusive watch had to be kept on the whole system of guards and barriers to find both the most favourable moment during the twenty-four hours for the attempt and the most favourable place. The main methods of getting out of camp, subject of course to considerable variation in detail, were by cutting through the wire or finding some point where it was possible to climb out without alarming sentries, by tunnelling under the wire, by disguise or impersonation, or by hiding in rubbish or clinging under carts which were passing out of the camp. The other two important methods of escape were from working parties and from parties in transit, particularly from trains.**

**It was no easy matter to cut through the outer wire of an established prison camp. The fence would probably be 12 feet high and double, with a jumble of concertina wire in the centre, thickly hung with bits of tin ready to jangle loudly at the slightest touch. Inside the wire a margin of soil about ten feet wide was kept soft by constant raking so that footprints would show up. In Japanese camps a few strands of wire were electrified. The whole fence was lit at night by high arc-lamps; guarded by day and night, it was overlooked by high watchtowers on which the sentries had movable searchlights to help them in their task. Machine guns were mounted in these towers covering the approach to the wire, and the sentries themselves were armed.**

**In addition to sentries perched up in these observation towers, many German and Italian camps also had sentries on beats outside the wire. In Germany the prisoners were generally forbidden to move out of their huts at night, and roving guards with trained dogs patrolled the compounds at night. Some smaller and temporary camps were less formidably enclosed. In Crete it was easy to get out under the wire. An**

astute prisoner with a bent for escaping (Lieutenant Thomas <sup>1</sup>) noticed the one line of weakness in the German prison camp at **Salonika**. He cut through the bolts of a door of a building on the outside of one enclosure (a three-night job), passed through it at the right moment (two searchlights on high towers had to be kept in motion to cover three sides of a square and for a few seconds each side in turn would be more or less dark) to reach the one point on the outer wall which was hidden from the view of all the sentries, and there climbed out. Even then he landed in the street beside two German soldiers, but they were engaged in a drunken argument and did not notice him. In general, however, the prisoner's chance of escape 'over the wall' was the slimmest of all the possible means.

Tunnelling might be described as the escaper's favourite indoor sport. If it succeeded, tunnelling out of camp outwitted the enemy more spectacularly than any other type of escape. The absorbing work and long-term planning involved, demanding the loyal co-operation of a fairly large body of men, made digging a tunnel enthralling as a sport even if it never became a means of escape. The two great difficulties of tunnelling were the disposal of the spoil inconspicuously and the concealment of the entrance. At Lamsdorf (Stalag VIII B) a tunnel 130 yards long led 10 feet below the surface from a hut in the Canadian compound to bushy ground outside affording good cover; it was lined throughout with bedboards, and air was taken down into it along a trunk built from tins fitted together (the **Red Cross** parcel again!), operated by a fan geared to the motor of a gramophone. The spoil was taken out in tins and dumped on a sports ground where the soil was being turned over. This tunnel was kept open, undiscovered, for a year. When it was used for an escape, friends of the escapers created an ingenious diversion. During the day someone hit a ball across the soft earth just inside the wire, and then secured the German sentry's permission to retrieve it. While doing so he slipped a piece of string round the wire low down on the fence, and left it lying across the soft earth perimeter. That night someone pulled this piece of string hard, making the wire jangle wildly and attracting the attention of the guards. Simultaneously a

group of men got to work with wire cutters on the opposite side of the perimeter and actually cut a way through the wire. Meanwhile the real escape party was crawling out through the tunnel.

In nearly every permanent camp in **Germany** or **Italy** tunnels were at least started. The time needed to complete the work, and the probable chance of its being discovered before completion, made tunnelling on the whole an unfruitful mode of escape, though it offered the possibility of numbers escaping together. Usually the tunnels were discovered long before they were finished. Once found, they were blown up or blocked at the entrance; some remained undiscovered but were caved in when the suspicious enemy drove heavy vehicles round and round the camp.

One of the neatest tunnelling exploits was that in which nineteen men escaped from Gruppignano in October 1942. Spurred on by the incautious boasts of the fire-eating carabinieri commandant that no prisoner could escape from *his*, camp, men set to work in four-man shifts to build a tunnel,

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<sup>1</sup> Lt-Col W. B. Thomas, DSO, MC and bar, m.i.d., US Silver Star; Kenya; born **Nelson**, 29 Jun 1918; bank officer; CO 23 Bn 1944-45; twice wounded; wounded and p.w. May 1941; escaped Nov 1941; returned to unit, **Syria**, May 1942; Hampshire Regt 1947-; author of *Dare to Be Free* (Wingate, 1951).

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two working on the 'face', two disposing of the spoil by cramming it under the floor of the hut. The tunnel, driven down 12 feet and then out towards the wire, was only three feet high and the width of a man's body, so that lack of air, the great enemy of the tunneller, soon made the work terribly uncomfortable. The metal conduit round the electric light wires in the hut was stripped off, led down into the tunnel, and a bellows used to pump air down it. The only tools available were an old pick head and a small sledge carrying a bucket to draw out the spoil. In spite of all difficulties the tunnel was taken 40 feet in a fortnight, 94 feet in a month. Then it was taken up to ground level, work stopping at

the grass roots, 40 feet past the nearest sentry post. The escapers crawled out one stormy evening shortly after the work had been finished, one by one making the thirty-yard dash to the cover of a maize crop. The whole exit operation had taken three hours to complete. It was bad luck that all the nineteen, handicapped by the bad weather which had made their break-out more secure, were recaptured during the next few days.

With tunnels may be mentioned drains. In Italy, in particular, old buildings often concealed ancient *cloacae*, sometimes of considerable size, big enough at least for a man to crawl along. It was by means of a tunnel linking drains that a small group escaped in the spring of 1943 from the formidable fortress of Gavi. Other heroic spirits elsewhere fruitlessly explored drains so narrow that it was not possible to turn round to go backwards in them—dark, noisome, claustrophobic, filled with rats. <sup>1</sup>

The method of passing the guards at a camp entrance by impersonation or disguise was obviously not a mode of escape that could be used frequently. The more ambitious escapers imitated some personage who was on a visit to the camp—the representative of the International Red Cross, a German officer, an Italian interpreter complete with beard. This required careful preparation, but although very risky, usually worked for those bold enough to try it. Some, however, relied on improvisation, on the inspiration of the moment. One New Zealand sergeant escaped from a hospital in [Greece](#) by walking out into the lobby, putting on the greatcoat and peaked hat of a visiting German officer, and stepping out into the rain past a sentry ‘who was frozen into a salute’. A New Zealand medical officer (Captain Webster <sup>2</sup>) also escaped from a prisoner-of-war hospital in [Italy](#), but under German guard, in disguise—a simple one: he wore a blue air force shirt without a collar and hospital trousers. His escape equipment consisted solely of a pipe, a tin of tobacco, a cake of soap, and one packet of Italian cigarettes. To get out he had to traverse two long corridors, descend a long staircase, and cross a courtyard: three friends were posted to give

him the all-clear along this route. Just before reaching the last sentry at the street door he lit a cigarette. Then he 'walked slowly past the sentry, looking at him with the cigarette drooping from my mouth as I passed. He did not seem half as interested in me as I was in him.' Webster then made for the house of an Italian acquaintance.

Close study of the method of garbage disposal in a camp might allow an escaper a ride out to freedom. Some men had themselves wrapped up in bundles of rubbish. Others clung to the undersides of carts or hung there uneasily in rope slings, hoping not to be seen. Some escapes were made in North Africa by this means.

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<sup>1</sup> *Unwilling Guests*, J. D. Gerard (A. H. and A. W. Reed), p. 97.

<sup>2</sup> Maj F. E. Webster; **Auckland**; born **New Plymouth**, 20 Jan 1903; medical practitioner; p.w. 28 Nov 1941; escaped 12 Sep 1943; reached Allied lines, **Italy**, 6 Sep 1944.

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In working parties in **Italy** opportunities for escape were less frequent than in **Germany**. The Italians placed strong guards over the prisoners while they were actually working; the Germans left them very much more to themselves, and on farms prisoners very often worked alone or with one or two other prisoners. The quarters of working parties were not nearly so elaborately barred and enclosed nor so well guarded as the main camps. Moreover, the prisoner on a working party had the maximum chance of getting in touch with civilians who might help him or at least supply him with escape materials. Typical of these escapes was one made in May 1943 by two men who were working in a German paper factory. They got out by removing the bars from the window of their sleeping quarters. German workers in the same factory had given them substantial help: civilian clothes, food, some money, and maps. 'One man in the SS was to help us on to a troop train going to **France**, but at the last moment he changed his mind, but he did not give us away.' This was amazing help to be given by Germans (and in that



respect not at all typical), but these were Sudeten Germans, 'very democratic and friendly'. <sup>1</sup>

In the first days after capture in **Greece** or in North Africa, while moving on foot under guard, and in the last days of the great marches across **Germany**, men sometimes made a dash for freedom. In North Africa men walked hundreds of miles through the desert, desperately thirsty, to rejoin their units. Others took advantage of momentary inattention on the part of the enemy, and at considerable risk made off in the enemy's own transport. In Italy groups in transit were usually too heavily guarded, and in **Germany** the chances that an impromptu escape might succeed were small, so that attempts made to escape while travelling between camps were infrequent. However, on trains taking prisoners from **Greece** to **Germany**, and particularly from **Italy** to **Germany** after the Italian armistice, hundreds of men escaped, though many who succeeded in getting off the train were quickly gathered in by German patrols.

One of the most courageous escapes from trains was made by a New Zealand sergeant-major (R. H. Thomson <sup>2</sup>) who had fallen very foul of his German captors in **Salonika** prison by attempting to knock out a guard with his boot in order to escape. After being badly beaten up, he was tied up with wire and put on a train for **Germany** in the German guards' carriage. They placed him in the small compartment outside the lavatory and mounted guard over him. After desperate, clandestine efforts he was able to free his hands and then fling himself bodily through the window. Skinned and bruised, Thomson set out on foot and finally reached **Salonika**, but some months later was handed over to the police by smugglers who had promised to ferry him across the Struma River.

The moment they entered the closed trucks in which they were to travel from **Italy** to **Germany**, most prisoners set about examining the possibilities of finding a way out. Those who were in steel trucks had the hardest task; with wooden walls enclosing them men had a better chance. Many wooden doors yielded sufficiently to the efforts of those

who hacked at them with knives, forks, and even a dentist's drill to allow someone's fingers or even a whole hand to reach out and release the catch. Jumping a train was doubly dangerous: the guards, with machine guns mounted on the roof or on flat cars here and there in the line of trucks, blazed away indiscrimin-

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<sup>1</sup> Account by Sgt B. J. Crowley.

<sup>2</sup> WO I R. H. Thomson, DCM, m.i.d.; **Wellington**; born **Port Chalmers**, 19 Feb 1912; school-teacher; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

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ately

, and also attempted to pick off anyone they saw escaping. In the darkness it was not possible to choose a comfortable spot to land on, and the chances of getting killed along the track winding through the eastern Alps were considerable.

The escape of a wagonload of sick officers is among the most heroic of train-jumping episodes. Perhaps because the prisoners were considered too ill to be dangerous, the grating in the roof of their truck was left unsecured. A Montenegrin lieutenant gave a practical demonstration of how it could be lifted. At dusk these men all jumped the train; a man who had his leg in plaster had his crutch handed out to him through the hole in the roof while he waited on the running board before jumping. A New Zealand medical officer (W. G. Gray <sup>1</sup>) was the last to climb out 'with his little black bag to attend to his patients'. Two New Zealand medical orderlies were ordered to remain, as otherwise the prisoners in the train would have been without medical aid.

Halts gave some limited opportunities to make a break. Men were alert to seize the shadow of an opportunity. During an Allied air raid on the line between **Italy** and **Germany**, guards and prisoners alike abandoned the train; a New Zealander shared the shelter of a culvert

with a guard and two other prisoners. At the close of the raid he went out the opposite end of the culvert from the guard and disappeared into the Italian countryside.

No method of escape was easy. None was safe. Although he devoted much ingenuity to deceiving his captors, the escaper could never be sure that he would not get a bullet in his receding back. If he was recaptured in enemy country, although he was generally honourably treated, even with a certain admiration, he could never be sure that he would not be the victim of atrocity.

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<sup>1</sup> Capt W. G. Gray, m.i.d.; **Auckland**; born **Auckland**, 13 Jul 1913; medical practitioner; p.w. Nov 1941; escaped to **Switzerland**, Nov 1943.

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# EPIISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## ESCAPES IN CRETE

## *Escapes in Crete*

**THE Germans caught many men at Sfakia on the south coast of Crete, where they were left behind in the evacuation. These troops had to march back the way they had come across the steep spine of the island. Hungry, tired, and dispirited, most of them took weeks to recover, and the scanty rations in the pen at Galatas did not hasten the return of their full strength. As soon as they explored the camp they found it fairly easy to escape; indeed, many went out regularly on foraging expeditions, finding it possible both to leave camp and return to it unobserved, or sometimes with the connivance of the more tolerant German guards. The count of prisoners was not strictly kept; men who had previously escaped had the habit of wandering back when conditions outside became too difficult; and this indefiniteness about the number of prisoners (in the absence of a formal roll call) helped other parties to pass through the wire later. Supervision was lax, possibly because of the difficulty of leaving Crete.**

**Some prisoners got out of the Galatas compound in daylight while the camp was distracted by scrambles for bread thrown over the wire by Cretan women sympathisers. One pair was induced to escape because the already meagre bread ration was about to be cut still further. They took a tracing from a small-scale map of Crete in the camp and got out at night, working their way under the wire; after crossing a road into a ditch, they crawled along it until clear of the camp vicinity. These two, and other parties, made off into the hills, where they nearly always found food and friendship.**

**Life in the mountain villages of Crete was pleasant if not luxurious. One escaper (Driver Winter <sup>1</sup> recovered his strength on a diet of fresh vegetables, eggs, wholemeal bread, and a morning glass of ass's milk, and then, like so many others, was inspired by his good health to look for a passage off the island and, moving away from the safety of a secure hiding place, was caught by a German patrol. The Germans court-martialled him and sentenced him to death, several times warning him**

to expect execution 'at dawn'. When he still refused to reveal the names of his Cretan friends, the Germans saw that their bluff had failed and they quietly returned him a week later to the **Galatas** camp.

Alarmed by the number of prisoners scattered through the hills of **Crete**, the Germans sent out an increasing number of patrols, which fired at random into the bushes covering the slopes of the upland valleys to encourage prisoners to come out and give themselves up. By this time many **Cretans**, afraid of the round-ups of able-bodied labourers or of reprisals for acts against the occupation forces, were also hiding in caves in the hills, for it was no longer safe to remain in the farms and villages. Several villages which the Germans accused of guerrilla activities were razed. The entire population of one village was taken out and shot; it is said that two New Zealanders in civilian clothing were among the victims. The Cretans had an efficient 'bush telegraph' that reported the movements of German patrols, but the systematic German drives through the hills made it increasingly difficult to live securely even in the open. In any case the condition of the fugitives, venturing out only at night, lousy, dirty, and hungry, was unenviable, and it was discouraging rather than consoling that many **Cretans** shared it. Under these circumstances it was scarcely surprising that many prisoners were disheartened enough to give themselves up to the Germans. Nevertheless some prisoners hung on for months and even years without detection, usually in the most humble of homes. One prisoner (Driver Phelan <sup>2</sup>), who was fifteen months free in **Crete**, had been sheltered by a man who followed the 'honourable occupation of thief', a Cretan Robin Hood whose gang of seven men preyed on the wealthy for the benefit of the poor —themselves. All escapers appreciated the great risks the **Cretans** ran for them as well as the unstinted hospitality of these naturally poor communities, 'even if' (as one escaped prisoner wrote) 'we did rather offend one old woman by refusing the dish of snails we uncovered beneath the new potatoes decorated with cooked rice in pumpkin flowers'.

The escapers scattered through the hill villages were all eager to get

a passage to the Middle East and return to their units. The only ways of doing this were in Greek fishing boats or in the submarines of the **Royal Navy**, which made a number of calls at suitably quiet spots to take off the fugitives. The Germans allowed the local fishing boats only enough fuel for the voyage to the Greek mainland or to some nearer island. Few boat owners were willing to sell, especially

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<sup>1</sup> Sgt P. L. Winter; Tikorangi, Waitara; born NZ 28 Jul 1919; journalist; p.w. 20 Jun 1941; escaped Mar 1945.

<sup>2</sup> Dvr E. J. A. Phelan, MM; born **Auckland**, 22 Jun 1917; motor driver; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

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if the payment was a promissory note; also, they risked German reprisals. The rumour of a ship could tempt men out of hiding, often to their undoing.

Some were indefatigable in their search for boats. In Crete Driver Phelan made many attempts to negotiate a sale. Twice he actually set out: once the boat sank a few hundred yards out, and on the second time the motor broke down a mile from the shore. On a third occasion he carried out the much bolder plan which led to his recapture. Equipped with arms, a **Mediterranean** chart, and a compass 'taken from a crashed British bomber', he and four Australians walked eighty miles from their place of shelter to the Gulf of Kisamos, the headquarters of a Greek-manned boat which was shipping cargo to **Athens** for the Germans. After a few days' wait the 45-foot boat was seized at anchor at night (one prisoner swam out and brought the dinghy ashore for the others), the Greek crew of seven were overpowered, and the boat taken to another bay to wait until the next night, when the party could leave at dusk and gain the full advantage of the hours of darkness in avoiding the next morning's air patrols. This was an unlucky miscalculation, as at daybreak they found themselves within the field of fire of a German post which opened up with a machine gun to indicate that the crew should

come ashore to explain who they were. The Greek crew were sent ashore in the dinghy while the prisoners slipped over the seaward side and swam to the land. This stealth was in vain, however, as a German patrol recaptured them a few hours later.

A New Zealand sergeant (J. A. Redpath <sup>1</sup>) found out from the **Cretans** some weeks after the fall of **Crete** that some Greeks were running a regular service (surreptitiously, but apparently with German acquiescence) bringing back to their homes **Cretans** who had been serving with the Greek forces on the mainland. He induced the Greek launch owner to take back a party of escaped prisoners (three Australians and three New Zealanders) to the mainland on the empty return trip. The six prisoners were put ashore near Cape Malea, and were seen landing by the Italian garrison of a lighthouse there. Fortunately the jittery Italians opened fire at a range of several hundred yards, giving the escapers the opportunity to make a dash for the hills, where they hid with sympathetic Greeks. This group eventually reached Egypt after an eventful voyage by caique across the **Mediterranean**.

One New Zealander's experience was typical of that of the hundreds of men who were taken off the south coast of **Crete** by submarine. Gunner Diver <sup>2</sup> had escaped with a friend from the German prison camp and had found his first shelter with a Greek spiritualist and his Irish wife, themselves refugees from **Canea**. They stayed later in a cottage on a high summer farm in the hills, where two friendly **Cretans** fed them until their health had improved sufficiently for them to resume their search for a way out. A month of wandering ended at a lonely spot on the coast where the 'bush telegraph' had said something might happen. They had been wearing civilian clothes and had picked up enough of the language to converse with the **Cretans**, but had not risked any contact with the Germans. A hungry twelve days' wait in the neighbouring hills was rewarded

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<sup>1</sup> WO II J. A. Redpath, DCM, MM; **Kerikeri**; born NZ 2 Feb 1904; company manager; p.w. 20 Jun 1941; escaped 26 Jul



1941; wounded and recaptured, Antiparos, 22 Feb 1942; escaped, Italy, 13 Sep 1943; served in 'A' Force ( MI9) in Middle East.

<sup>2</sup> WO II F. M. Diver, MM; Rototuna, Hamilton; born NZ 16 Jun 1912; dairy-factory hand; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

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by the appearance of a large British submarine, which came in close to the shore at night. A line supported on cork floats was run out from the ship to the shore and the escaping prisoners made their way to the submarine, first discarding most of their civilian clothes on the beach. It was 'a tense period before we finally pulled out—there was enough noise to attract Hitler himself to the spot on shore, from those who thought they were drowning on the way out, and out on the sub itself as civilians were regretfully but firmly refused a passage'. The submarine took off 125 men on this occasion, including 62 New Zealanders. On board, the escapers were provided with clothes and cigarettes, a tot of rum all round, innumerable cups of tea and slices of bread and butter. The submarine's commander took the risk of travelling most of the way to Alexandria on the surface, for greater speed and the greater comfort of his passengers. On land, too, their welcome was bounteous: 'The final touch occurred when Red Caps threw in crates of beer as the express was pulling out.' Before rejoining their units these men were all placed under oath of secrecy as to the mode of their escape.

# EPIISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## ESCAPES IN GREECE

## *Escapes in Greece*

**TOGETHER** with those soldiers fortunate enough to avoid capture altogether, some hundreds of escapers roamed **Greece** for months, indeed years, after the unlucky spring of 1941. Guerrilla warfare broke out in **Greece** almost immediately after the surrender of the Greek army to the Germans, and British servicemen were associated with many of the partisan groups. A prisoner who escaped from his Greek prison in an ingenious manner <sup>1</sup> afterwards joined a so-called guerrilla group in the hills: 'they were an idle, drunken crowd and we spent most of our time in the cafes While in their company I was very seldom sober.' This gang lived partly by stealing, partly by 'sponging on' relatives in the nearby villages. This man was recaptured when he walked into an inn full of Germans, and was returned to prison after three months' liberty 'suffering from the combined effects of too little food and too much wine'.

As they had done in **Crete** and were later to do in **Italy**, the escapers threw themselves on the mercy as well as on the hospitality of the local population, and found that their trust was seldom misplaced. Yet in **Greece** popular opinion was a little fickle. One escaper who spent much time with the Greeks said **Greece** was the land of 'you never know'. Certainly instances can be cited both of betrayal of escaped prisoners by Greeks to the Germans and of magnificent self-sacrifice by Greeks to shield prisoners from discovery and recapture. Civilian Greeks and British servicemen did not run the same risks: for the latter the penalty on recapture was return to the status of prisoners of war; for the former the penalty for helping a British serviceman was death, with or without reprisals against the offender's family. Thus it is amazing that the Greeks so generally helped prisoners.

Here is a typical escaper's experience. About 18 miles out of **Salonika**, three New Zealanders jumped off the train taking them to **Germany**. The nearest farmer sheltered them. They each in

Identity card of E. F. Cooper, a New Zealander who escaped in Greece. He is described as an engineer of Athens



Identity card of E. F. Cooper, a New Zealand who escaped in Greece. He is described as an engineer of Athens

A type of escape map printed on fine rice-paper and supplied to the forces



A type of escape map printed on fine rice-paper and supplied to the forces



Captain C. H. Upham's escape kit at Oflag VA, Weinsberg

**Captain C. H. Upham's escape kit at Oflag VA, Weinsberg**



A cave where escapers hid in the White Mountains  
of Crete

**A cave where escapers hid in the [White Mountains of Crete](#)**



A cartoon on tunnelling, by W. A. [gap — reason: unclear]pps in *Interlude*, a book compiled by British prisoners of war at Stalag IIIA at Gorlitz, east of Dresden

**One of the monasteries on Mount Athos visited by Lt W. B. Thomas in his search for refuge, and described in *Dare to be Free***



One of the monasteries on Mount Athos visited by Lt W. B. Thomas in his search for refuge, and described in *Dare to be Free*

**A cartoon on tunnelling, by W. A. [gap — reason: unclear]pps in *Interlude*, a book compiled by British prisoners of war at Stalag IIIA at Gorlitz, east of Dresden**



Head monks at Lavra monastery, Mount Athos. Third from the right is the only doctor in a community of 6000 monks; he helped Thomas considerably

**Head monks at Lavra monastery, Mount Athos. Third from the right is the only doctor in a community of 6000 monks; he helped Thomas considerably**



Two prisoners of war in disguise before their escape from Stalag XVIII A

**Two prisoners of war in disguise before their escape from [Stalag XVIII A](#)**



The 'Heath Robinson' scheme devised and described by Major C. N. Armstrong. Two escapers swung on a pivoted bar and dropped over the inside wire

**The 'Heath Robinson' scheme devised and described by Major C. N. Armstrong. Two escapers**



Private James Reid, a New Zealand escaper, and a Turkish policeman in October 1941

**Private James Reid, a New Zealand escaper, and a Turkish policeman in October 1941**





Private L. W. Dahm, a New Zealander passing as an Italian

**Private L. W. Dahm, a New Zealander passing as an Italian**

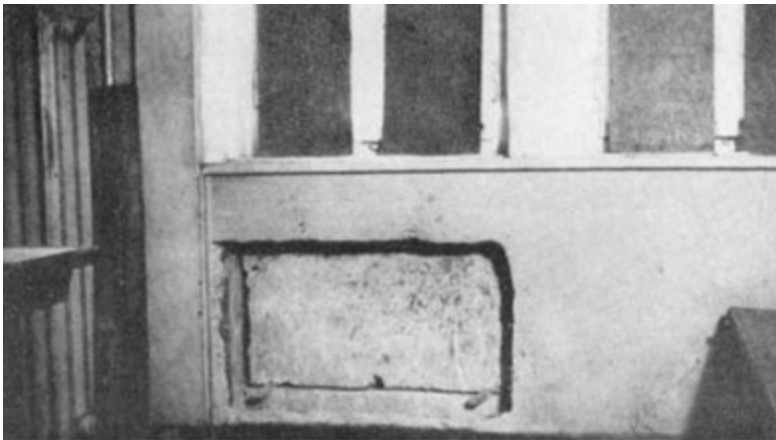


Passo Moro, used as an escape route from Northern Italy to Switzerland

**Passo Moro, used as an escape route from Northern Italy to Switzerland**



The first meal in Swiss hands  
**The first meal in Swiss hands**



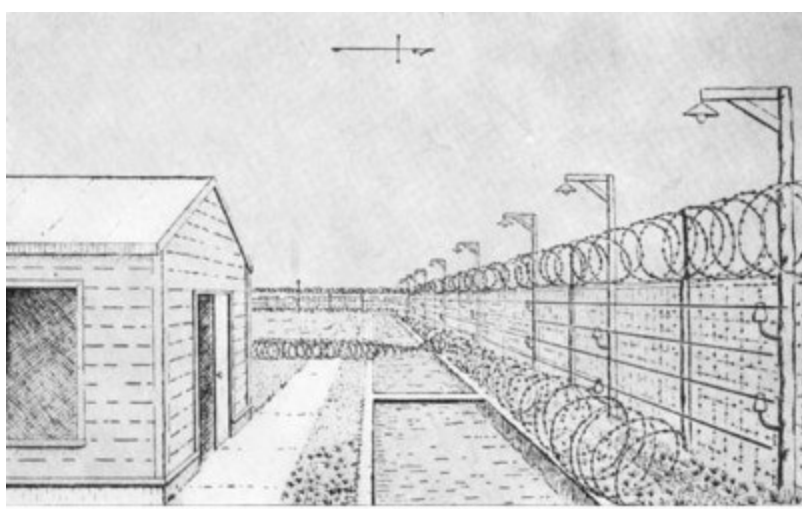
A German photograph of a hole in a wall made for an attempted escape by four officers in Oflag IX A/H at Spangenburg

**A German photograph of a hole in a wall made for an attempted escape by four officers in Oflag IX A/H at Spangenburg**



Drivers E. R. Silverwood and E. J. A. Phelan (4 RMT Company) and Private F. Simmonds (British Army) at Stockholm in January 1944 after a successful escape from Germany to Sweden

**Drivers E. R. Silverwood and E.J.A. Phelan (4 RMT Company) and Private F. Simmonds (British Army) at Stockholm in January 1944 after a successful escape from Germany to Sweden**



A corner of Shamshuipo Camp, Hong Kong, scene of a daring escape by a New Zealand naval officer, Lt R. B. Goodwin

A corner of Shamshuipo Camp, **Hong Kong**, scene of a daring escape by a New Zealand naval officer, Lt R. B. Goodwing

turn had malaria and remained in the same spot for several months, working in the fields with the peasants. The whole village knew of their presence, and everyone clubbed together to feed them. They decided to attempt to reach **Turkey** with the aid of the Greek underground and were found billets in **Salonika**. A Greek lieutenant guided the party through the mountains for a week to near the port of Stavros, where they hoped to find a ship bound for **Turkey**. The guide was arrested, as they afterwards heard, and the scheme collapsed. The escapers, tired of hanging about in hungry hiding, ultimately returned to the village that had previously sheltered them. This had been searched by the Germans only the week before. They set out again for the coast and applied to a Greek officer to whom they had been recommended: he provided, not a boat to take them to **Turkey**, but a German lorry which returned them to the 'Frontstalag' in **Salonika**.

One of these three men escaped later from **Salonika**, cutting unobserved through the barbed wire at the back of a group of buildings. After some time at large, during which he had another bout of malaria, he was arrested by the local Greek police on Cassandra Peninsula. They treated him well but handed him back to the Germans. Yet another escaper was saved by the timely intervention of a Greek policeman from entering a café full of Germans. The same man was both helped in his

escape plans by Greek police and later arrested elsewhere as a vagabond: the fact that he was an escaped prisoner of war was an embarrassment to them and one policeman connived at his escape from the civil jail.

The land route to **Turkey**, the *ignis fatuus* of many escapers in **Greece**, was cut off by the invading Bulgarians, hostile to all Britishers, and even in the nominally Greek areas in the north some villages, particularly the settlements of White Russians, were pro-Axis. But the district to the east of **Salonika**, where the picturesque Chalcidike Peninsula reaches, like Neptune's three-pronged trident, out into the Aegean towards **Turkey**, offered the shortest journey by sea to freedom. (The most northerly of the three peninsulas is commonly called Mount Athos and is famous as the seat of Greek monasticism.) Thus the men who had failed to find a way through to **Turkey-in- Europe** had a second chance of reaching **Turkey-in- Asia** by sea. But boats were rare, and when one was found it might not be able to take all the escapers waiting to sail.

A New Zealander, who had suffered the chagrin of missing a passage to **Turkey**, abandoned the north of **Greece** in favour of a more southern 'escape route' which he had heard was controlled by the Greek trunk-line telephone operators, and which was supposed to ship men away from somewhere in the **Athens** area. He walked by night; this is the custom among the Greeks themselves thanks to the daytime heat of the sun, so that the night traveller did not draw any special attention to himself, although he could not escape the clamours of the fierce dogs whose teeth were one of the hazards of the country for fugitives. He found the **Mount Olympus** area in the hands of Communist partisans who had attracted deserters of like mind from among the German and Italian occupation troops. He had begun by being guided, but somehow the guiding system broke down, and finally he was left at a loose end, out of touch with any sympathisers. His luck had nearly run out. Although he managed to convince a plain-clothes carabinieri (the Italians occupied southern **Greece**, the Germans most of the north) that he was a German simply by showing him his German-inscribed prisoner-of-war registration

disc, the mayor of a village where he appealed for help promised him guides but instead produced two Greek policemen. He was arrested and handed over to the Italians.

**Greece** was also a land of deluding promises. Greek sympathisers held out hopes of all sorts of help to escapers out of sheer amiability, and it was sometimes several weeks before their guests realised how little reliance could be placed in Greek promises. On the other hand the same Greeks, often miserably poor people, were as generous with the practical help—food, civilian clothing, secure shelter—which they actually could supply as they had been with promises of help beyond their power to give. One very poor family who slept on the floor of one of their two rooms had in the other room a fully made-up bed, which they kept only for possible visitors and which they gladly put at the disposal of a New Zealand escaper.

It was not easy to get a passage away from **Greece**. Although many small craft plied between the Greek islands and the mainland, they were strictly controlled, their fuel rationed, were guarded well by night, and at sea were liable to be stopped and questioned by Italian patrol boats. The owners were unwilling to sacrifice their livelihood and risk their necks by undertaking a forbidden voyage, and the prospect of a reward or a substantial sum in payment for the boat itself was of small account when set against the safety of their families. Yet one Greek was willing to attempt to take a party to **Alexandria** instead of the much shorter and easier voyage to **Turkey**, because he was afraid of the treatment he might receive from the Turks who have old quarrels with the Greeks.

The small party under Sergeant Redpath which reached the Greek mainland from **Crete** (as described above) found staunch friends there but had great difficulty in getting a boat. They were helped by many English-speaking Greeks in the area near Neapolis, where they hid after landing under fire. The local priest was a particular friend and he organised contributions to the cost of feeding the escapers and helped them to negotiate for the purchase of a launch, a project that eventually came to nothing. Meanwhile the Italian garrison in this area was



actively seeking out British troops in hiding. The position became more and more precarious. The Italians carried out house to house searches while the forewarned escapers retired to caves nearby. With this increasing intimidation of the neighbourhood, the men realised that if they were to get a boat at all they would have to seize it by force.

Their first seizure of a vessel went smoothly enough, but unluckily the fuel tanks were empty: she had just finished a voyage. Later they boarded a caique of 150 tons and seized it at pistol point, but this too did not have the fuel to reach Egypt.

These two frustrated attempts showed the escapers the wisdom of acquiring a supply of diesel oil for themselves. Their third seizure of a ship went well. They—the party had now grown to about twenty—boarded a caique at night, shut up the Greek crew in their own cabins, and put to sea. They had fuel for thirty-six hours' sailing. Their navigation instruments were an army compass and a protractor, while their chart was a small-scale map of **Europe**. In order to pass the inshore waters unmolested, they left the swastika flag flying from the masthead. Here they had reckoned without the **RAF**, and they had the unpleasant experience of being bombed by their friends. Fortunately they were a small target and escaped damage. Later, after they had hauled down the Nazi flag and were obviously on an illegal course, they were bombed and machine-gunned four times by German aircraft. They ran out of fuel before sighting the coast of Egypt, but continued under sail. Although a storm damaged the sail, they reached the North African coast near Mersa Matruh after a five-day voyage.

Lieutenant Thomas, whose escape from **Salonika** is mentioned earlier, made four unsuccessful attempts to get away while in hospital in **Athens** recovering from severe wounds suffered in the counter-attack at **Galatas**. The Germans asked the Australian medical officer in charge of the hospital 'why there should be a combatant officer in a fit state to escape yet remaining in the hospital. He asked them to look at my leg. Now with the running around the wound had reopened, not painfully,

but most spectacularly, and the German officers came over, shook hands with me and sent me back to bed.' On his ingenious second attempt he 'died' from pneumonia and hoped to pass out of hospital in a coffin, but a German doctor decided to look at the corpse. Later in **Salonika** when his wound had healed, but before his strength had been fully restored, he devoted prolonged study to the defences of the camp, and finding a weakness, used it to escape. He threw himself on the mercy of a poor household on the outskirts of the town. These and later Greek hosts proved faithful and hospitable, though he had many rebuffs as well as welcomes in the course of several months' peregrinations in search of a passage to **Turkey**. On one occasion he collapsed in the middle of a village street and was found there by a Greek soldier who hid him in a remote hut. This was a bad village to go to for help, as the Germans had shortly before obliged the mayor to choose five young men whom they had shot as a punishment for the many British escapers who had used the village's boats. He found a haven of refuge on Mount Athos peninsula, though not an entirely secure one, as some monasteries, of White Russian monks, were pro-Axis and were said to have already betrayed escaped British prisoners.

On Easter Saturday 1942 he took advantage of the general preoccupation with religious observance to steal a boat, and put to sea with four companions, two Englishmen, a Russian pilot, and a Greek officer. They ran into a sharp storm which split their sail, nearly swamped the boat, and eventually drove them back about 60 miles to the coast of Athos near their starting point. Later, elsewhere in **Greece**, the second of two other attempts at stealing a boat was successful. After a voyage lengthened out to five days by unfavourable winds, his party landed in **Turkey** 80 miles north of **Smyrna**. Two weeks later he crossed the Turkish border into **Syria**, where the first troops he met were New Zealanders of his own battalion and the first officer he saw was his brother. Persistence had brought good luck in the end.

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<sup>1</sup> While lodged in a small civil jail in **Athens**, he noticed that the shower room had lockers large enough to hold a man. One night

**he hid in a locker and, on a signal from his fellow prisoners, got out and walked to the gate. After some moments in hiding near it, he passed out of the gate between the retreating backs of two sentries woodenly pacing up and down outside on regular, symmetrical beats.**

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# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## THE ITALIAN ARMISTICE

## *The Italian Armistice*

**IN** the turmoil that followed the Italian armistice of 8 September 1943, rumour and counter-rumour clouded the issue. Senior officers had been instructed by the **War Office** that prisoners should remain in their camps; many men who might have escaped let their chances slip. In some camps their guards remained to hand them over to the Germans. In others the guards dispersed or the prisoners successfully took matters into their own hands and escaped *en masse*. One Fascist commandant had declared his intention of handing over his camp intact to the Germans. The camp leader announced this to the prisoners under cover of a gathering at a baseball match, telling them it was now a case of every man for himself. That evening many men escaped through a hole in the wire cut for them by friendly guards. Their emotions on looking back at the lights of the camp from outside would have been shared by many others: 'The thought that they were free and would no more pace round and round inside that wire like animals in a cage made the lads feel like shouting for joy, but all exuberance was suppressed...' <sup>1</sup>

Awkwardly in the darkness they traversed a region of river and canal inland from **Venice** until a priest gave them shelter. At his instance they changed into civilian clothes and set out, with guides he arranged for them, to take the train south. 'They will never forget the strain of those days on the train, when every Ted <sup>2</sup> they saw seemed to be on the verge of seeing through their disguise.' It was a four-day journey to **Pescara** where they alighted, with changes at **Padua** and **Ferrara**. From **Pescara** they had a week's walk, living on whatever food they could beg from the peasants, until at **San Severo** they reached British troops.

This party had been lucky; it had reached the Allied lines in a few days. Other parties later took as many months to do the same or a much shorter journey.

All over **Italy** thousands of British prisoners were at large in the countryside. The Italians rose to the occasion with an unexpected generosity and courage. Soon Italian fugitives (deserters from the army

and later most able-bodied men, who were being sought for German war factories) and evacuees were to swell these numbers. Although the wealthier classes of Italians did take part in sheltering and succouring escaped prisoners of war, the chief burden of this task fell upon the poorest classes, the farmers and peasants. It is amazing with what spontaneous generosity this burden was accepted. All escapers in **Italy** after the armistice could give similar testimony to this: ‘Much has been said in these times (and not least by the Italians themselves) about Italian cowardice and Italian treachery. But here is a man (and there are hundreds of others like him) who had run the risk of being shot, who has shared his family's food to the last crumb, and who has lodged, clothed, and protected four strangers for over three months—and who now proposes continuing to do so, while perfectly aware of the risk that he is running. What is this, if not courage and loyalty?’ <sup>3</sup>

An escaper met a family whose five sons had all been shot by the Germans for helping fugitive prisoners of war, but they still gave them their help: “‘They have taken everything from me. What more can they take? I started with my sons on this road, I shall continue along it....’” <sup>4</sup>

The risks run by the Italian people on behalf of British prisoners were real enough. A prisoner who spent a year in hiding in **Italy** sketched the successive phases of his precarious freedom. During the first two months after the armistice German patrols roamed the countryside looking for escapers, but unsystematically and at haphazard. But during December 1943 and January 1944 the technique of using Fascist spies to find out where prisoners were hiding and betray them to the Germans made life increasingly difficult. This writer estimated that 80 per cent of the men still at large were recaptured during this phase. He himself at one time spent three weeks without stirring from an upstairs room, and searching Germans were twice in the room below him. A new phase opened in May 1944 when the Germans began actively impressing Italians for work in **Germany**. Whole villages would be cordoned off; the able-bodied men who could escaped to the hills

<sup>1</sup> **Account by Pte R. Kendrick.**

<sup>2</sup> ***Tedesco*, Italian for German.**

<sup>3</sup> ***War in Val d'Orcia*, Iris Origo (Jonathan Cape), p. 146.**

<sup>4</sup> ***The Way Out*, Uys Krige (Collins), p. 307. This South African writer's book should not be confused with another excellent narrative of escape in **Italy** with the same title by a New Zealand officer, Malcolm J. Mason**

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or forests. The Germans made a habit of shooting on sight anyone seen running. The woods soon carried quite a large population, fugitive Italians and British escapers, escaped Russian and Yugoslav prisoners of war, even Hungarian and Austrian deserters from the Axis forces. Without arms or supplies, few of these assemblies of men on the run could be organised as effective partisans: the partisan activities of most value did not begin until 1945. Some partisans did intermittently fight the Germans, often creating by their irresponsibility additional danger; for their sporadic forays drew reprisals on themselves, on escapers, and on the innocent population.

It is fair to say that the average escaped prisoner was genuinely surprised by the welcome he received from the Italian people. The difference between the negligence and inefficiency of the Italian administration of the prison camps and the kindness, courage, and generosity of the illiterate peasants was as sharp as it was unexpected. Undoubtedly some Italians helped escapers in order to ingratiate themselves with what they thought was now the winning side. Others seemed to cast off the fears that had weighed on them under Fascism, and sustained by their hatred of the Germans, whose brutality and undisguised contempt for their former allies had earned them this feeling, took the greatest risks for their guests without any hope or contemplation of reward. An English escaper remarked that his time in

hiding with the Italian people was ‘the greatest experience of my life’, and never again could he think in the narrow terms of nations and races. <sup>1</sup> The countrymen of Garibaldi did not lack courage, but it was evoked in them not by the distant, abstract issues of the battlefield, but by the immediate human needs of the unfortunate and the weak, for his own experiences under Fascism had given the peasant an instinctive sympathy for the hunted and persecuted. The mere economic burden on an impoverished and agriculturally backward people of feeding and clothing many thousands of fugitives was tremendous. Many of these men were ill and needed extra care involving additional trouble, expense, and risk. In only one small particular did the Italians fail their guests and that a matter over which they had no control—their tongues. The garrulity of the country folk and villagers, their traditional emotional outlet, provided the news that Fascist spies were waiting to pick up, and it betrayed many prisoners. Yet even this trait was not wholly to the escaper's disadvantage: it induced different neighbourhoods to vie with each other in hospitality to escapers, and it helped Italian morale. Sheltering an Allied fugitive was the resistance of the Italian peasant to the dreaded powers of the Axis and should be held in honour.

Before the armistice it had been difficult to escape from **Italy**. Most men of British race were easily distinguishable from native Italians by the Italians themselves, even when they wore Italian clothes. At that time the way to freedom led to the north, into **Switzerland** or **Yugoslavia**, or through **France** to **Spain**. A few prisoners escaped to **Switzerland**—very few, as Brigadiers Hargest <sup>2</sup> and Miles are said to have been two of the only five British escapers to reach **Switzerland** before the Italian armistice <sup>3</sup> — and a few, like Denvir, <sup>4</sup> to **Yugoslavia**. After the armistice a number of men got out to those countries, but most made their way south to the Allied lines.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Way Out*, Uys Krige, p. 309.

<sup>2</sup> See *Farewell Campo 12*, James Hargest (Michael Joseph; Whitcombe and Tombs).

<sup>3</sup> *Life Without Ladies*, Colin Armstrong ( Whitcombe and Tombs), p. 189.

<sup>4</sup> 2 Lt J. Denvir, DCM; born Scotland, 5 May 1913; storehand; p.w. Apr 1941. See *Partisan*, James Caffin (Collins, Auckland) for the story of Denvir's remarkable career in Yugoslavia.

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The conditions along the old frontier of Yugoslavia and Italy (the Italians had occupied parts of Yugoslavia) did not favour the passage of escapers even after the armistice. German patrols were very active in the border area. Some men had bitter disappointments. An 'escape club' formed by the leading Italians in a district in the hinterland of Venice passed men in groups of about twenty up to the Yugoslav frontier. Dressed in civilian clothes (one narrator described himself in his navy blue double-breasted suit, pale blue shirt, and semi-stiff collar with the Italian national tie in red and green and a Borsolino felt hat as 'the complete commercial traveller'), they boarded a train, with guides, and travelled 100 kilometres towards Yugoslavia. Germans passed up and down the train, but all went well. When they left the train, a guide took them up winding tracks into the hills, and soon they were in the hands of partisans, who had quantities of stolen arms but were still an underground movement. They moved on under the care of guides in night marches, hiding by day, nearly to the frontier, where a number of other escapers were harbouring with a group of active partisans. Some New Zealanders and South Africans told them here that it was impossible to cross the frontier and that conditions with the partisans were bad, food and even water being short, and the guard duty imposed on everybody severe. The party retraced its steps, made the original train journey in reverse, and returned to its former excellent hosts to find them now much more fearful. Soon the landowner of the village where they lived ordered all prisoners of war to leave the area, no doubt a

necessary action for the safety of his people but one which resulted in the recapture of most of the group of escapers after seven months' freedom.

Not all had such bad luck, though the Yugoslav partisans were not then entirely co-operative. Another party, largely composed of men who had escaped from Campo PG 107 and led by two officers (one of whom—Captain Riddiford <sup>1</sup>—had escaped from **Spittal** in **Austria** and walked back into **Italy** from there), won through to **Yugoslavia**, only to be held up by the refusal of the Yugoslav partisans to give them guides to the Adriatic coast. They were passed on, arguing strenuously and with more candour than is usual between allies, from command to command, at times being virtually prisoners. The Yugoslavs were anxious for them to join their own ranks and also feared the efficiency of a new German drive to clear their area. In spite of their obstruction the prisoners themselves left the shelter of the wooded inland mountains and made their own way without guides across thirty miles of country dominated by the Germans to reach their objective, the coast, where a British liaison officer arranged their passage to southern **Italy**. They left behind a third of their number on the way (there were 25 New Zealanders in the 62 who reached safety), but the rest were in **Bari** by Christmas 1943. The authorities in **Bari** had the singular idea of lodging them first in the old Italian prisoner-of-war camp, which had been perhaps the hungriest and most miserable in all **Italy**. As a result of representations made by Riddiford, the British Government arranged with **Marshal Tito** that escaping British troops should receive better treatment in partisan hands and be sure of a passage out to **Italy**.

The adventures of the escapers who got through to the British lines in southern **Italy** were legion. Some went a good proportion of the way in the anxious comfort of the Italian railways; others walked; others again waited for the Allied armies to advance up the peninsula, the least

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<sup>1</sup> Capt D. J. Riddiford, MC; **Wellington**; born **Wellington**, 11 Mar 1914; barrister and solicitor; p.w. 30 Nov 1941; escaped 2

Oct 1943; wounded Jun 1944.

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fruitful option, but one many men had believed would bring freedom soonest. One escaper (J. A. Redpath) jumped off a train on the way to **Germany** and walked 700 miles to the Allied lines in south **Italy** in forty days. Naturally those who were already in central or southern **Italy** had the best chance of getting south. The folds of the Apennine Mountains afforded cover for fugitives but were difficult to pass in winter. Some men were taken through to the British lines by Italian and British guides trained at **Bari** and dropped by parachute in the German-held area especially to lead escapers to safety. Others owed their freedom to the help of amateur Italian guides. These men, though they first undertook this dangerous work from patriotic motives, were willing to take a reward, and most escapers were anxious to give them one. The Allied command made the heaviest demands on their patriotism, as the official recompense paid to these guides for bringing British escapers to safety was £1 a head, and this at a time when the Germans were offering a reward of £20 a head for the betrayal of escaped prisoners to them. <sup>1</sup> The chances of being caught on the way down **Italy** were considerably more than even. German posts and patrols, Fascist spies or indiscreet Italians, the men's own poor health and endurance sapped by their years in prison camp, all took a toll, and it fell upon the stirring and the enterprising as readily as on those who were content to drift into freedom. Persistence, strongly aided by good luck, was still the recipe for success. Those who got through to the British lines, equally with those who failed and were recaptured, had many breath-taking escapes from disaster. Some have published books on their adventures which, in addition to those already referred to, vividly recreate the atmosphere of this time. <sup>2</sup> These articulate New Zealanders speak eloquently for the many silent ones who made the same night marches in all weathers, hid in the same woods, caves, huts, and villages, and walked the same hard road to freedom.

Still another way out was by sea. A number of men were evacuated down the Adriatic from near **Venice** in small naval craft as late as April 1945. In their nineteen months of liberty in **Italy** they had worked and



**lived as peasants, but increasingly precariously, as the delay in the arrival of the Allied armies had caused a decline in the pro-British feeling of the months following the armistice. It had been a time of ‘indescribable monotony’, the only course to follow being ‘to watch the news and work in the fields’. They were especially anxious about the feelings of their families at home with no news of them for so long. Aerial combats overhead were an emblem of hope. When Italian partisans proposed evacuation by sea, this group did not hope for too much: they had to be cautious as ‘many of our friends had been sold’. But everything went smoothly. The partisans piloted them to the evacuation beach and then ranged themselves to guard it, while the prisoners went out to the MLs in the rubber boats which brought arms ashore for the partisans.**

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**<sup>1</sup> *The Way Out*, Uys Krige, pp. 371–3.**

**<sup>2</sup> *The Way Out*, by Malcolm J. Mason (Paul); *Unwilling Guests*, by J. D. Gerard (A. H. and A. W. Reed); and *Poor People—Poor Us*, by J. E. Broad (H. H. Tombs).**

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# EPIISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## ESCAPERS IN SWITZERLAND

## *Escapers in Switzerland*

**WHEN** the hospitality of the Italian people had become strained and Fascist activity more menacing, many men were encouraged by their proximity to its frontiers to escape to **Switzerland**. The last part of this journey, usually through mountainous country to avoid the more closely guarded portions of the frontier, was the worst. Most people arrived in rags and tatters and physically exhausted. Some narrowly escaped death in alpine glaciers.

In Switzerland a curious new phase of prisoner-of-war life began. Swiss neutrality was rigidly enforced. The escapers were obliged to remain, but they were no longer in the fullest sense prisoners. They enjoyed some freedom of movement, and they could work or study as they pleased. They lived in camps of about 200, well found but not luxurious. At a typical working camp, **Bornhausen**, the men were engaged during eight and a half or nine hours a day (with a five-and-a-half-day week) on a land-clearing and drainage contract whose efficient execution rebutted the accusation made by some Swiss that the British 'would not work'. Some spent their time taking university courses, others in training for trades. Many of them took advantage of the special winter sports' camps opened for them to see some of the most beautiful of Swiss pleasure resorts. Nearly all enjoyed the hospitality of Swiss families and learned to know and love a country in many respects like their own. After the liberation of **France** ninety-odd New Zealanders in **Switzerland** went home by way of Marseilles and the **Middle East**.

# EPIISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## ESCAPES IN GERMANY

## *Escapes in Germany*

**THE German system of placing men out in small working camps and leaving them in comparative freedom 'on the job' favoured escapes. It was so much easier to escape from a working party, as compared with a regular prison camp, that many officers exchanged identities with men to secure this opportunity. Immediately after the intense disappointment of being taken from **Italy** to **Germany** in September 1943, men who had had no chance of jumping from the train felt an overwhelming impulse to try their luck. Several succeeded at this time, both officers and men.**

**The officers from the Italian camps were quartered first at **Spittal-on-the-Drau**, a large cosmopolitan camp. They were not counted into camp, and at the first roll call next day many hid, thus making the number officially in the camp smaller than the number it actually held. An irregular situation like this could not go on for ever. It was imperative to make the most of it at once. A number of officers changed places with men and volunteered for the work camp nearest the Italian frontier, a transparent manoeuvre which the Germans saw through. Most of these officers returned to their own rank discomfited, except for those few who had taken the precaution of really learning the part they were to play, knowing by heart all the personal details of the man they were impersonating. One New Zealand officer who had made this change made a further one, changing uniforms with a Frenchman; he left the camp with a French working party and escaped with two South Africans in the direction of the Italian frontier, a hard four days' walk away, 'moving by night across valleys and by day through hills and woods', although only 18 miles in distance. Some good luck with unguarded bridges enabled this party to reach shelter in **Italy** and eventual freedom through **Yugoslavia**.**

**In Germany itself the scales were heavily weighted against the escaper. Most escapers pretended to be foreign workers, a good enough alibi so far as language was concerned, but one which might get the impersonator into difficulties if he met anyone of the nationality he had**

assumed. As nearly all the escapers in **Germany** were recaptured, it must be presumed that these subterfuges were easily penetrated by the Germans. It should be remembered that **Germany** was swarming with police, perpetually on the alert as the two million foreign workers in her service could never be entirely trusted and the character of the Nazi regime necessitated the supervision of opinion. In addition to the ordinary civil police, **Germany** enjoyed the services of the SA and the SS, as well as of Himmler's **Gestapo**, whose arbitrary and often bloody acts and domineering behaviour in the name of security were found oppressive enough by the Germans themselves. Even the railways had their special police who checked the papers of travellers on long journeys, but who might, with luck, be avoided by taking a series of local trains for comparatively short distances.

Another factor that worked against the escaper was the scruffiness of his home-made clothes. Even if he were wearing genuine civilian garments, he often had to show himself to the public in clothes in which he had slept or in which he had been crawling about in fields or swamps or wading rivers in darkness. The German civilians were generally clean and tidily dressed, making the travelling escaped prisoner of war conspicuous by his untidiness and poor clothes and possibly by personal dirtiness as well.

The best chance of leaving **Germany** lay in securing the sympathy and co-operation of some group of foreign workers. These men hated the Germans, and although their morale varied and some were notorious collaborators, in many groups it remained very high. Both French and Poles maintained what was virtually an underground in some parts of **Germany**, and once an escaper had blundered into acquaintance with its members (the first contact was usually a matter of luck) he could count on shelter and help. In both occupied and unoccupied **France**, of course, a vigorous underground movement could forward escapers to eventual freedom through **Spain** <sup>1</sup> and Portugal, but the difficulty was to get in touch with the right people to begin with in a country where everyone had reason to fear the stool-pigeon and the spy.

The escaper who tried to remain entirely independent of all outside help and avoid all contacts with anyone, walking by night and hiding by day, had practically no chance of getting out of **Germany** unless he were very near a frontier when he escaped. Men walked into **France, Italy, Yugoslavia, Hungary, and Switzerland**, but succeeded only when a few night marches lay between them and freedom. They could take it for granted that the civil population would be hostile and immediately suspicious. Roads would be patrolled, bridges and other vital points guarded. The man without guides, relying on some possibly very rudimentary map, had every chance of stumbling on disaster.

The recaptured escaper was lucky if he fell into the hands of the civil police. Those whom the **Gestapo** intercepted sometimes had disagreeable experiences before being eventually acknowledged

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<sup>1</sup> In *Farewell Campo 12*, Brigadier Hargest describes how he escaped from **Italy** through **Switzerland** and **France** to **Spain**.

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as prisoners of war and returned to their camps. It is likely that the Stalag Luft III victims were not the only prisoners of war killed by the **Gestapo**. One escaper who had a wait in Prague between trains went into a cinema as a good way of spending some of the time inconspicuously. But he so far forgot himself as to laugh at the absurdities of a German propaganda film and was arrested in the cinema by the **Gestapo**; he remained in its hands a fortnight before being returned to his prison camp.

In the general disintegration of 1945 many men escaped from the columns of prisoners being marched west in front of the Russian advances, and others slipped away from working parties before being made to move. These men found much better support than would have been possible earlier in the war. Anyone not actually a German would help them. One New Zealander who fell out from a column lived a few days in the fields on swedes and potatoes before meeting **United States** troops, a somewhat hazardous encounter as an American soldier wearing

a huge marksmanship badge shot at him and later greeted him with the cry, 'Boy, I don't know how I missed you!' Another New Zealander who broke away from a marching column hid with some Poles, hoping to be able to wait for the Russians to arrive. Moved out of one place after another by the Germans, still posing and working as a Pole, he eventually rode a bicycle 100 miles into **Czechoslovakia**, where a group of Czech youths sheltered him until the war ended.

At first sight the route out of **Germany** by way of **Sweden** might seem unpromising. The Baltic sea was an additional obstacle, but in actual fact was no worse a hazard than a guarded land frontier. Escapers had the chance of stowing away in one of the Swedish ships which regularly called at Stettin to lift cargoes of coal. The docks were well guarded, but apparently the Germans reposed overmuch faith in the efficiency of their searches of ships before they sailed, and a steady trickle of stowaway escapers reached **Sweden** and freedom by this means.

A New Zealander (Sergeant Crowley <sup>1</sup>) and an Englishman who worked in a Breslau gasworks exploited the contacts they made during their work to accumulate escape equipment. They got civilian clothes from Ukrainian workers in exchange for cigarettes; a Pole supplied a railway timetable, a Frenchman a watch. They already had a battery of forged papers produced for them in their prison camp—an *Arbeitsdienstaussweis* (worker's pass), an *Eisenbahnaussweis* (permit to travel by rail), and a *Personalausweis* (personal identity papers). One afternoon in September 1943 they climbed out of their sleeping quarters and scrambled over the gasworks' wall. Crowley caught a tram to the station (his companion just missed it), and then travelled in four different trains to Stettin. After reconnoitring the harbour and finding it impregnable, he met three Frenchmen, who were at first very suspicious of him, but on proof of his identity (he had to trust *them!*) took him to their own barracks. There to his surprise and delight was his friend who had missed the tram and the first train; he had caught a different series of trains without mishap. The Frenchmen hid them for three days and then smuggled them on board a Swedish coal ship they were detailed to



load. The two escapers hid in the middle of the coal but under a ventilator. Some of the crew knew of their presence and helped them to defeat the searching **Gestapo**: 'we were told afterwards by a seaman that while the search was on one of us coughed and he stamped on the deck to drown the sound.' Later a friendly sailor passed down to them through the ventilator an overcoat,

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<sup>1</sup> Sgt B. J. Crowley, DCM, EM; **Auckland**; born **Dunedin**, 24 Jun 1914; salesman; p.w. 28 Apr 1941; escaped after four attempts on 23 Sep 1943.

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coffee, cigarettes, and a 'letter of encouragement'. When the ship had sailed well beyond the three-mile limit, the escapers reported themselves to the captain, who treated them well. In **Sweden** they were eventually handed over to the British Legation.

A few months later a party of three (two New Zealanders <sup>1</sup> and an Englishman) escaped near Breslau and travelled to Stettin by train, carrying the forged papers of Belgian workers. An air raid helped them to pass through **Berlin** unchallenged, and at Stettin they walked out of the station by the unguarded staff entrance as 'apparently the Germans had not considered the possibility of anyone being such a criminal as to use an unauthorised entrance'. At Stettin they passed an anxious week living in a German lodging house trying to find a means of getting on board a ship. They had no food coupons and so could eat only at a welfare centre which served watery soup twice a day. The 500 marks the party had among them were ample, since food, the only thing they needed besides railway tickets, could not be bought. Finally they buttonholed a Swedish sailor and appealed to him for help. He cautiously disclaimed assuming responsibility for them but suggested they might follow him on board as best they could. In spite of this diffidence the Swede proved himself a firm friend. He took the German guard on the gangway off to have a drink and so allowed the escapers to pass on board. The ship lay alongside for five days, and all this time he fed them. He moved them into the most secure place on board, the ship's rope

locker, hiding them behind a pile of ropes. When the **Gestapo** made their routine search of the ship at sailing time, the kerosene he had astutely sprinkled on top of the ropes put the police dog accompanying the searchers off the scent. The escapers gave themselves up when the ship berthed at a Swedish port. They spent about a month in **Stockholm**, enjoying the hospitality of British residents, before being flown out to **Scotland**.

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<sup>1</sup> Drivers E. R. Silverwood and E. J. A. Phelan.

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# EPIISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## THE LUFT THREE TUNNEL

## *The Luft Three Tunnel*

**THE** prison camp established at Sagan, between **Berlin** and Breslau, known as Stalag Luft III, grew into the largest **Air Force** officers' camp in **Germany** with, eventually, a population of over ten thousand. Many of the aircrew officers who were held in it had had narrow escapes from death before reaching this camp: some had fallen incredible heights without parachutes and landed alive; others had come down at sea and spent many days of agony in rubber dinghies; a few had been roughly handled by the mob after parachuting down near the cities they had been bombing. Many of the inhabitants of Luft III had spent months in hospital; some had had limbs amputated. But their morale was high.

A number of the officers in the stalag's North Compound, which was opened early in 1943, had gained invaluable experience in making tunnels at other camps. Amongst other things they had discovered that at depths exceeding 25 feet the listening devices installed by the Germans to check tunnelling activities were ineffective. <sup>2</sup> Also they profited by the confusion of taking up their brand-new quarters to make the entrances to the tunnels which were afterwards dug. The Germans had raised the huts a foot off the ground to make the detection of tunnelling easier. But the prisoners cut through the concrete foundations under heating stoves and through the concrete floor of a shower room. Nearly everyone in the camp undertook some escape duties. Besides the actual tunnellers, a select band who kept their mouths shut, the work called for 'stooges', whose tedious sentry duty made the tasks of the rest safe; electricians who linked the three tunnels to the camp supply; tinsmiths who made from empty **Red Cross** tins the ingenious air trunks which ventilated the narrow tunnels; 'penguins' who carried out the sandy spoil in **Red Cross** parcel boxes or in long cloth cylinders hidden in their trousers, and dumped it in inconspicuous places; forgers who prepared the false documents for use in moving about in **Germany** after the break; the tailors who produced civilian clothing, and the 'contacts' who cultivated the friendship of individual guards and 'softened them up' to the point where they would

**bring contraband articles into camp in exchange for chocolate and cigarettes from Red Cross parcels. Few escape teams were so well integrated, so unselfish, or so single in purpose.**

**Of the three tunnels, 'Tom', 'Dick', and 'Harry', begun at Luft III, the first was found by the Germans when nearly finished; the second, never taken far, was used as a dump for the spoil from the first; while the third, 'Harry', was taken 340 feet at a depth of 30 feet and broken on the night of 24-25 March 1944, approximately a year after the North Compound escapers began operations. It had been hoped to pass over 200 men out through 'Harry'. Thirty per cent of the escapers had been nominated by the escape committee from among those who had contributed most to the project; the rest had been selected by lot. Almost six hundred men had helped with the work, and it was an invidious task to decide who should share in the reward. The end of the tunnel proved to be much nearer to the wire and its sentries than had been calculated, and emergence from it needed great care. Then sand fell in the tunnel itself through the bulky packs of some escapers catching in the wooden lining as they were hauled along its trolley way. With these delays the hoped-for rate of egress was never achieved, but seventy-six men got away before an astounded sentry, patrolling outside the wire in the early morning, nearly trod in the hole and raised the alarm.**

**So far the Luft III break had been an escape among other escapes, though certainly an exceptionally well-organised and successful one. It was the sequel which made it one of the tragedies of the war. The whole countryside was raised to catch the escapers. Huge numbers of Germans, troops and civilians, were engaged in the round-up; in this way alone the escape had hindered the German war effort. The reprisals taken on the men in camp were insignificant, but a few weeks after the break the new commandant of the camp, severely embarrassed by the duty, announced officially to the senior British officer that forty-one of the escapers had been shot 'while resisting arrest or attempting further escape after arrest'. The senior British officer's question as to how many had been**

wounded was unanswerable. The list of those who had died in this way finally reached fifty. <sup>1</sup> Of the other twenty-six, three reached freedom, fifteen came back to Stalag Luft III, and eight were held afterwards in concentration camps. The order to kill the fifty escapers came from **Hitler** himself, and Himmler's **Gestapo** carried it out.

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<sup>2</sup> *Escape to Danger*, Flight-Lieutenant Paul Brickhill and Conrad Norton ( **Faber**), p. 76. Most of this account of the Luft III tunnel escape is based on this book (which also relates some outstanding personal adventures) or on three articles published in the *Sunday Express* ( **London**) in October 1945 by Flt Lt Brickhill.

<sup>1</sup> It included two members of the **RNZAF**, Flt Lt Arnold Christensen and Fg Off P. P. J. Pohe, and a New Zealander in the **RAF**, Sqn Ldr J. A. Williams. Among the dead were also Englishmen, Canadians, Australians, South Africans, Poles, Norwegians, a Frenchman, a Belgian, a Czech, and a Greek.

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# EPIISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## ESCAPERS IN YUGOSLAVIA

## *Escapers in Yugoslavia*

**MEN** escaped into **Yugoslavia** from **Greece**, from **Italy**, and from **Germany**. Some New Zealanders fought with distinction in **Marshal Tito's** partisan forces in their heroic resistance to the Germans and Italians. <sup>1</sup> Most simply passed through **Yugoslavia**. It has been seen that at one time this was not altogether easy, and German patrols made it always a gamble. But by 1944 the Yugoslavs were venturing deep into **Austria** or German-held territory to pilot men out to freedom and to recruit sympathisers to join their own armies.

In August 1944 the men at a working camp attached to **Stalag XVIII A** (Wolfsberg) organised a mass escape. The camp 'man of confidence', an English NCO, had through 'bribery and corruption over a long period' entered into intelligence with the Yugoslav underground. Seven men left the camp the day before the escape on reconnaissance, and returned next day with partisans, who 'swooped down the hillside and disarmed the eighteen guards'. The Yugoslav escort of nine guides, led by a man with a wooden leg, accompanied the group of about eighty prisoners all the way to safety. It was still a dangerous and hungry journey: the partisans could not provide more than one meal a day for themselves or their guests, and it was necessary to keep moving. It took the party eleven days, travelling as stealthily as possible through the hills south-east of Maribor, to reach a congregation area near Ljubliana. Five transport planes landed on an improvised runway in open fields, and within a few hours the former prisoners were in British hands in **Bari**.

Things might not always go so smoothly. Another party about a month later on approximately the same journey came partially to grief. A New Zealander (Sapper Roy Natusch <sup>2</sup>) put into touch with the Yugoslav underground by an Austrian hostile to the Nazis, escaped from Radkersburg and joined a column of about 400 civilian Yugoslavs, men and women, leaving **Austria** to join Tito's forces, convoyed by armed partisan soldiers. This rather unwieldy and poorly disciplined body was



twice ambushed by the Germans, who seemed to know of its route, and the party played a desperate game of blind man's buff in the forested hills trying to elude a German cordon. The physical conditions of the journey were in any case severe, with long marches on little food up and down mountains. Natusch's own group of sixty reached safety, and he himself was taken to [Bari](#) in a Russian-piloted transport plane.

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<sup>1</sup> See *Partisan*, by James Caffin (the exploits of John Denvir).

<sup>2</sup> Spr R. S. Natusch, MM; Maraekakaho, Hastings; born NZ 16 Jul 1918; architectural student; p.w. 28 Apr 1941; escaped after nine attempts on 12 Sep 1944.

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# EPIISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## ESCAPES TO CHINA

## *Escapes to China*

**F**EW prisoners of war escaped from Japanese hands. On the islands of the East Indies thousands of miles of sea separated them from friendly territory. In Malaya and **Thailand** 1000 miles of jungle lay between the prison camps and Allied forces. **Burma** was nearer but just as hopeless to pass. No one escaped from **Japan** itself. A European would be immediately remarked among a population of Asiatics in all these territories more or less hostile to the white man. In China the chance was a little better as the Chinese bitterly hated the Japanese. Some prisoners escaped from **Hong Kong** in the first weeks after its fall.

A pilot officer of the **RNZAF** (E. D. Crossley <sup>1</sup>) escaped from Shamshuipo Camp, **Hong Kong**, in February 1942 with two others and reached the guerrilla-held area of **China**. They had bribed a Chinese to take them by sampan across the harbour, and although fired on by the Japanese managed to get into the hills. On their fifth day out they had the bad luck to meet a gang of Chinese bandits by whom they were set upon and robbed; although these men took their money, they left the escapers their maps and food and thus the ability to go on. Once in the friendly hands of the guerrillas, the escapers were passed on by water or by road to the interior of **China** and thence flown out to **Calcutta**.

Another New Zealander, a lieutenant in the **RNZNVR** (R. B. Goodwin <sup>2</sup>), had been wounded in the defence of **Hong Kong** and was unable to attempt escape in the early period when the Japanese hold on the territory was comparatively loose. His escape in July 1944 was a supreme feat of nerve and endurance. Lieutenant Goodwin has himself graphically described his adventure in his book *Hongkong Escape*. <sup>3</sup> This was one of the few escapes made with virtually no co-operation from fellow prisoners and no prearranged help from outside; indeed, the escaper felt he had more to fear from some fellow prisoners than from the Japanese.

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<sup>1</sup> Sqn Ldr E. D. Crossley, MC, m.i.d.; **Lower Hutt**; born

**Wellington**, 25 May 1917; company manager; p.w. 25 Dec 1941; escaped 2 Feb 1942.

<sup>2</sup> Lt-Cdr R. B. Goodwin, OBE; **Wellington**; born NZ 15 Jul 1902; civil servant; p.w. 25 Dec 1941; escaped Jul 1944.

<sup>3</sup> **Arthur Barker Ltd.**

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# **EPIISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2**

## **REPRISALS AND PUNISHMENTS**

## *Reprisals and Punishments*

**THE** Italians were much more deeply moved by successful escapes than the Germans. They vented their spite first on those who remained behind, imposing restrictions which, even if apparently petty, could be exceedingly irritating in the cramped unnatural atmosphere of a prison camp. The first target for their vengeance was the **Red Cross** parcel. The whole camp might be deprived of their parcels for weeks after an escape. Time out of doors would be cut down and any small privileges withdrawn. The Italian higher command took escapes very seriously, visiting the weight of its displeasure upon the commandant of the camp, any other responsible officers, and the guards, in the form of fines and sentences of imprisonment. The escapers themselves on recapture were given at least a month in the camp jail, in some camps three months. Sometimes they were manhandled as well.

The Germans took escapes rather more lightheartedly, almost, it might be said, in a sporting spirit. But German officers and guards could expect punishment for negligence. It was unusual, in fact, for the prisoners who remained behind not to suffer in some way for the escapes of others, even if this did not go beyond the inconvenience of extra searches and roll calls. The recaptured escaper was rarely harshly treated. He could expect to be sentenced to up to a month in the cells, but the punishment was usually less, a week or a fortnight for the first offence. The execution of the Luft III escapers was so exceptionally atrocious that the men who remained behind in that camp at first believed that the announcement of the fifty deaths was only a ruse to discourage further escaping and that the victims were all alive in some other camp.

The prisoners of the Japanese could expect only death on recapture, possibly in an unpleasant form. Indeed, an escape from Japanese hands was a neck or nothing enterprise. Men who attempted escape from Changi Peninsula are known to have been shot. It was the fixed policy of the Japanese to execute recaptured escapers; it was also their policy to

**take severe physical reprisals on those who remained behind, particularly on the men sharing the hut of those who got away.**

**The chief risk that the escaper faced was of being shot by a sentry while actually getting away. Naturally this risk varied with time and place but was real enough in most camps, even if less important on a break from a working camp. Train escapes were in a special class for danger. On the trains taking British prisoners to **Germany** the night air was continuously shattered by machine-gun and rifle fire as German guards blazed away either at fugitives they actually saw or at random to discourage those they confidently expected might have escape in view. Train jumpers were wounded and killed by guards' bullets and by injuries received in their fall. Escape was never a safe pastime, a sport without penalty or forfeits. But only in the Japanese camps were the reprisals, punishments, and risks to the escaper or his friends in any sense a real deterrent.**

**\* \* \* \* \***

**It has been mentioned that the two things most needed for successful escape were persistence and good luck. The personal records of some escapers are amazing for the tenacity with which in the most unfavourable circumstances, and while under suspicion and disabilities from previous unsuccessful attempts, they stuck to the intention to escape. The hardened escaper, like the masters of other arts, tended to simplify, to use the most direct and most obvious methods, and to improvise when the occasion offered itself at some uncalculated juncture. Examples might be drawn from the complete escape careers of individuals to show to what point they were carried by their own unquenchable optimism and self-confidence. Few of those who escaped did so on their first attempt; one man made at least fifteen escapes before he finally reached safety. The boldness and enterprise needed for success were not confined to the comparatively few who reached freedom. As far as personal qualities went, many hundreds of other New Zealanders had all that was needed for the most ingenious and hazardous escapes.**

**The element of luck was so strong, so paramount, in successful escapes that it is both a distortion and an injustice to praise the escaper at the expense of the failed or would-be escaper. Some of the most gallant escapes, considered simply as actions, were failures; even when the initial evasion had been made good, a great proportion of escapers failed to leave the enemy country, and their possibly bold and original plan of leaving a camp was successfully executed in vain. There was nothing for them to do but to try again. The man whom no disappointment could overwhelm is the true epitome of the escaper, the persistent to whom good luck comes in the end.**



# EPISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## [BACKMATTER]

**THE AUTHOR: D. O. W. Hall** graduated at Cambridge with honours in English Literature and in History in 1929. He was Associate Editor of Centennial Publications. He served with the Royal New Zealand Naval Volunteer Reserve in the Pacific in the Second World War, and is now in Dunedin as Director of Adult Education, University of Otago.

# EPIISODES & STUDIES VOLUME 2

## POINT 175

**THE 23rd of November 1941 was the third Sunday of the month and devoted by the Lutheran Church to the memory of the dead. It was *Totensonntag* (Sunday of the Dead), equivalent to All Souls' Day, and it was natural that the Germans in North Africa should call the bloody battle they fought this day, when their **Afrika Korps** and an Italian armoured division overwhelmed 5 South African Brigade, the Battle of Sunday of the Dead. <sup>1</sup>**

**Their victory, however, was not complete. For one thing the losses inflicted on them by the gallant South Africans and the remnants of the British armour were more than they could afford. And as part of this battle, though the German Command was only vaguely aware of it, New Zealanders of 6 Brigade this day fought two important and largely successful actions. One of these, by 26 Battalion on the right or eastern flank of the main Axis attack, has already been described in this series by E. H. Smith in *Guns Against Tanks*. The other was an attack by 25 Battalion, joined later by 24 Battalion, to capture Hill 175 which barred the way to **Sidi Rezegh**.**

**This attack is described here, mainly in the words of participants. It was fiercely opposed by the enemy holding the feature and the ground beyond it <sup>2</sup> and proved bitter and costly. In it New Zealand infantry fought one of their hardest fights and some 120 of them lost their lives, so for us as well as for the Germans and South Africans, it was Sunday of the Dead.**

\* \* \* \* \*

**When the companies lined up—B on the right, D on the left, C in reserve behind D—the men were told the attack would be easy. ‘It won't be much; they're packing up already,’ said one voice. One rifleman understood it was to be ‘a bayonet charge to clear out a few pockets of the enemy about 300 yards to the front.’ Another expected ‘action against isolated machine- gun posts.’ A third was told that ‘we were to**

attack a German outpost position, and that the attack would follow the lines of our recent manoeuvres', and a fourth adds that 'after taking the position [we were] to dig in and prepare for a counter attack.' A fifth recalls that D Company was 'to move forward and capture a ridge supposedly lightly held'; and another from the same platoon states that 'opposition was not expected to be heavy.' A runner overheard Colonel G. J. McNaught telling a captain, 'I don't think you'll encounter much fire—perhaps a few MGs.' <sup>3</sup> Even

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<sup>1</sup> We are indebted to Colonel J. A. I. Agar-Hamilton of the South African Historical Section for pointing this out—and hence for the sub-title of this study.

<sup>2</sup> The German 361 Afrika Regiment, which included many Germans who had previously served with the French **Foreign Legion** and were therefore no strangers to the Desert.

<sup>3</sup> The riflemen quoted were Ptes B. H. Robb (10 Platoon), A. G. Reed (11 Pl), T. A. Pritchard (18 Pl), E. C. Moynihan (17 Pl), W. G. Gyde (18 Pl), and P. D. Greenlees (18 Pl). The runner was Cpl E. A. Eagan (C Coy). B Coy contained 10, 11 and 12 Platoons, C Coy 13, 14 and 15, and D Coy 16, 17 and 18.

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officers had much the same impression. 'We debussed,' says Lieutenant Miles Handyside of 16 Platoon, 'believing we were going to clean up a bit of light opposition.' Captain W. J. Heslop, commanding C Company, reports that the Colonel's information was that 'the position was lightly held by Germans who, upon observing our advance, would probably withdraw.'

Some men accepted this information; others did not. 'I don't like it much, boy,' said Sergeant R. Brown-Bayliss to a friend, 'it's too much like the book.' Some men, especially those who had lost mates in a skirmish that morning with Headquarters of the **Afrika Korps**, were only too anxious to get at grips with the enemy whatever the terms. 'To me

this attack could not come quick enough,' says Pte L. Grant, driver of a Bren carrier, who had had the sad duty of setting fire to a wrecked carrier containing the remains of a member of his platoon. Private Sam Brown of a mortar detachment moving up to support the left flank 'saw a few chaps who were old pals of the Greek campaign and moved over for a chat.' He was 'impressed with their obvious cheerfulness, and fervently hoped that it would not go too badly for them in the attack.' A typical greeting, extravagantly confident, was: 'Give them the works, Bill; see you at the Bengasi Brewery.' A few men who had no rightful place in the line of attack refused to be left out. Staff-Sergeant W. T. Marshall, quartermaster of C Company and aged 54, made his way up to 15 Platoon, despite his bad feet, and joined Corporal R. W. Common's section. Private Hugh Gamlin, a driver supposed to be back at the transport lines, lined up with 18 Platoon.

Whatever their outward calm, and however lightly they professed to view their tasks, officers and other ranks alike felt an inward strain of a sort which was not yet familiar. For this was their first action in the Desert, except for the morning's skirmish, and their first attack. Colonel McNaught had not fought with them in Greece but he had been in charge of Suda Docks through the worst of the blitz in Crete. Now, commanding officer of 25 Battalion in its first major attack, he was very much on his toes.

Brigadier H. E. Barrowclough had told him to expect little if any resistance and he briefed his subordinates accordingly, pointing out also that the ground just south of the cairn of stones which marked Trig Point 175 was a likely danger spot. He had no time to do more—no time for reconnaissance, no time for reflection and planning, no time for manoeuvre. He had only the knowledge of great urgency and a realisation that the simpler the arrangements the better —'I can almost hear myself now saying to myself "make it simple, make it simple".' And, underneath, was a dark suspicion that the attack might be 'a very sticky job'. From the moment the operation was ordered—about 11 a.m.—he had to produce a rapid stream of decisions to meet the zero hour of

11.30 a.m. 'At the most,' he says, 'I had two minutes to think about the whole set-up, and no time to weigh pros and cons.' His mind had to work fast and it seemed to rise to the occasion; he felt oddly exhilarated as though he could think more quickly and clearly than ever before in his life. In less than the half-hour allowed his men were lined up for the start. But his orders had to be carried downwards through company commanders to their platoons and thence to the infantry sections. The crowded minutes were too few and too short to finish this percolation to the last drop. 'Looking back now,' says McNaught, 'I can see that this haste was asking too much of the attacking troops. There was not enough time to brief the men properly or to tie up one or two points about my orders.'

For one thing, it was not even certain that the cairn was Point 175. The objective, clear enough on the map, was far from clear on the ground. On the map it was a tiny triangle surrounded by an oblong contour; but few officers and fewer NCOs had maps or time to study them, and so they remained unaware of a wadi which curled round from south to west of the cairn, and they knew little more of the escarpment to the north than they knew of the enemy who lurked in its folds and who had yet to show himself. There was only the hill itself, vague in outline and inscrutable in its promise. 'The ground to our front,' says Sam Brown, 'was a wide and seemingly flat area of about two square miles. As mortarmen, we shuddered.' Again he says: 'We could only see a long stretch of flat ground sloping gently upwards and dotted with an occasional tussock which appeared to be the only cover which it afforded.' To those on the right it seemed a flat plateau with the escarpment falling away to the north. Perhaps there was more vegetation there, for Private Reed says: 'Country fairly flat, with quite dense foot-high scrub.'

There had been some movement ahead at first but it soon stopped. According to Sergeant J. Huse of 13 Platoon, the brigade convoy had 'halted on high ground from which we could see enemy transport scuttling across the horizon. We could also hear machine-gun fire....Our

**artillery [29 Battery, 6 Field Regiment] was quickly brought up and began firing on the transport....'**

**These enemy vehicles were not on Hill 175, because Colonel C. E. Weir of 6 Field Regiment went with the Brigadier 'up to a vantage point to have a look and make a plan... and there wasn't a thing to be seen and I could have sworn that there were no Huns holding that hill.' The battery commander, Major H. S. Wilson, whose eight 25-pounders were to support the attack, states flatly: 'Point 175 could not be distinguished as a feature, and there was no visible indication that enemy were in the locality.' He nevertheless managed to pick out what he thought might be 'earthworks and possible M.G. or mortar positions' and got McNaught to agree to these as targets for the guns until FOOs <sup>1</sup> could indicate better ones. Lieutenant J. C. Muirhead, whose four K Troop two-pounders were to give anti-tank support, was concerned at the lack of cover for his conspicuous portées and decided that they should drive in reverse 200 yards behind the leading infantry, so that the crews could get some protection from their gunshields. He put Lieutenant E. L. Ryan in charge of the two guns, K3 and K4, on the left while he himself supported the right with K1 and K2. Vickers guns were not called for at the outset, presumably for lack of targets, or of time, or both.**

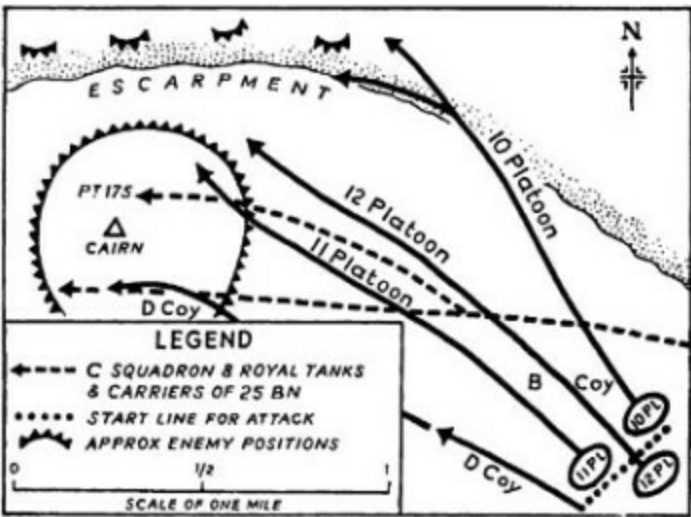
**The infantry, then, had dismounted from their three-ton lorries at the wadi less than two miles from the cairn and had marched through the gun positions to the flat ground beyond, facing west-north-west towards their objective. At zero hour they moved forward.**

**B Company was well extended and Lieutenant C. H. Cathie, commanding 10 Platoon with his right section moving along the top of the escarpment, was almost out of touch with the rest. His men were 'mostly new to battle but very keen, some too much so', and as they advanced they eagerly scanned the plateau ahead, the folds and abutments of the 80-foot-high escarpment,**

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<sup>1</sup> Forward Observation Officers.

and the flat below, up to and beyond the Trigh Capuzzo. But they discerned no threat and saw no enemy. Within a few minutes they were called to a halt.



25 BATTALION: B COMPANY'S INITIAL ATTACK

25 BATTALION: B COMPANY'S INITIAL ATTACK

To the south 11 Platoon, according to Private W. S. Bellerby, 'started off in file' to the tune of 'four 25-pounders which fired intermittently—I don't know what at. There was no other supporting fire.' After a short time, which he thinks less than five minutes (but which was probably longer), '[we] came under long range machine gun fire. As this fire became more intense we spread out in line in extended order. This fire was from directly in front of us.' Neither Bellerby nor other members of his platoon mention being halted at or before this stage.

Certainly 12 Platoon, in reserve some 200-300 yards behind 11 Platoon, got the order to halt, on the evidence of Private Reed:

Just before we started the artillery were pounding away and we passed through them, and then were ordered to stop. Plans were changed, more opposition than thought at first.

This was soon after 11.40 a.m., when Captain F. R. McBride, commanding B Company, was ordered 'to stay the attack and await tank



support.’ The method so far had been a formal infantry attack in which 10 Platoon was ‘to deal with the Escarpment and everything over the edge’, while 11 Platoon and, behind it, 12 Platoon were to make straight for the ground to the right (north) of the cairn.

D Company on the left had started in much the same way, except that none of its platoons seem to have been halted. In fact everything at first went just as the men had been led to expect. ‘Nothing happened,’ says Private Greenlees of 18 Platoon; ‘we just plodded up the slope.... somewhere up the rise in a wadi to the left we passed a tented encampment. There was no sign of life there.’ But Greenlees' platoon was in reserve and may have been lucky at this stage. The right forward platoon, No. 17, came under fire at once, if Private S. B. Wolfe's memory does not play him false:

.... right from the start we were under fire from M.G.s firing on what we thought were fixed lines. Small heaps of stones laid out in converging lines seemed to indicate this....

This fire, if it in fact opened so soon, must have been confined to the right of the company; for 16 Platoon, forward on the left, was not yet troubled.

Because of fresh intelligence that Hill 175 might be strongly defended, the Brigadier had decided to intervene, committing to the attack a squadron of sixteen Valentine infantry tanks —C Squadron of **8 Royal Tanks**. Hence the order to halt, which reached some of the attacking platoons but not others. Colonel McNaught had recalled his company commanders (by wireless or despatch rider) for another conference, as he had to adjust his plans. He now had even less time than before to work out details, but his main intention was clear and his orders went something like this: <sup>1</sup>

Here is our present position on map. There is Pt 175 1½ miles away. You can see a tallish object, call it “Cairn”. Beyond is what looks like a blockhouse. Call it “Blockhouse”.

**Enemy:** Probably in strength and on high ground both sides. Probably has tanks and may be using British tanks....

**Intention:** To capture and hold at all costs "HILL 175".

**Method:** Tanks. Advance in two waves. First wave advance at 15 m.p.h. [top speed for Valentines] and capture objective, will cross start line at zero. Second wave at Inf. pace with C Coy (800 yards behind forward companies)....

**Bren carriers:** Move at 15 m.p.h. immediately behind first tank wave and assist them.

The companies were to advance on a front of 400 yards each, mop up enemy on the objective, and hold the 'forward half of high ground'—a role which implied that the tanks of the first wave and the carriers would be able to capture the feature on their own. Zero hour was now noon; twenty minutes after this McNaught hoped to move his advanced headquarters to a position 500 yards east of the cairn which marked Point 175. The new arrangements, of course, percolated even less thoroughly than before to the rank and file, so that most infantry sections were still vague as to their tasks and remained under the same misapprehensions regarding the enemy.

The first wave of heavily-armoured Valentines rumbled forward, soon threading their way through the thin lines of infantry and leaving them behind. Two sections of carriers followed, like frisky terriers, with Private Grant 'worked up to good fighting spirit, giving my gun plenty of use' until Lieutenant C. S. Wroth, who rode with him, had to restrain him, saying, 'This is not a game of Cowboys and Indians.' Enemy infantry on the objective were cowed by the tanks and rounded up by the carriers in a matter of minutes, though some bolder spirits regained their nerve after the tanks had passed and manned their weapons again; others lay low and remained undetected. Resistance was ineffective and the crews of tanks and carriers had only to threaten and they were obeyed. But all this took place within a few hundred yards of the cairn;

infantry advancing towards this area had had their way paved by the armour, but on the extreme right and left there was resistance or the threat of it which the tanks had done nothing to overcome. For the infantry the fight was only beginning.

Cathie's platoon struck this resistance about 800 yards past the start line. Rifles and machine guns below the escarpment opened fire from the north and north-west and Cathie, as cager as his men, sent one section along the top to cover him with plunging fire and himself led the other two sections in bounds along the foot of the escarpment until they were near enough to fix bayonets and charge. 'The Jerries appeared from everywhere with their hands up,' says Cathie: 'most of them had machine guns but they dropped them pretty smartly.' About five Germans were killed and twenty captured in this assault at the cost of one man lightly wounded. But the section on top was getting impatient and, against orders, tried to get down the steep slope. In an exposed re-entrant three men were wounded, two of them badly, by another enemy party. Cathie's sections moved to help, flushing out twenty more prisoners from a cluster of tents on the way. Back on the plateau the wounded and prisoners were sent back to safety and the cat-and-dog fight with a more numerous enemy below was resumed. Cathie later went across

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<sup>1</sup> As reconstructed by Col McNaught a few months later.

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the flat to Colonel McNaught, exchanged a few words with him, and then took an 8-cwt. truck back to his platoon. With four or five men riding in this and the rest on foot, he made a sudden charge down a re-entrant and took another dozen or more prisoners. Two enemy tanks then appeared and he thought it better to mount the escarpment again, which meant losing the last lot of prisoners. For the next hour or so 10 Platoon was absorbed in preventing enemy parties from infiltrating below towards the battalion's rear.

The machine-gun fire which 11 Platoon met soon after the start,

according to Bellerby, 'became more and more intense—I never experienced anything like it again—and at the time I was wounded we were going to ground and going forward in bounds.' Bellerby was in No. 4 Section (under Corporal R. Sanders) which was accompanied after about half a mile by one of the Valentines, driving alongside at walking pace, firing its machine gun. 'There must have been about 1000 yds of flat to cover before we came to the enemy,' writes another member of the section, Private C. M. Morris. 'After getting amongst them,' he continues, 'we went to ground to wait for the troops on our right [presumably Cathie's platoon below the escarpment] to catch up with us. It was while waiting that Bennett <sup>1</sup> was killed and Shewan <sup>2</sup> and I wounded. A tent and dugout down a siding on our right with 12 or 15 Germans did the damage. They were taken prisoner by the other boys.'

Breasting the faint crest of a rise roughly north-east of the cairn, the section came under heavy fire from machine guns ahead and Sanders, Bellerby, and Private C. C. McNicol were hit. Perhaps it was here too that the platoon lost its commander, Lieutenant J. P. Tredray, a brave young officer, who was killed outright. To Bellerby and those with him it was exasperating that the ground in front still clung doggedly to its secrets, and there was no sign of the enemy but his deadly fire. The wounded, however, were left and those still on their feet continued to press westward.

What the rest of 11 Platoon was doing is not clear, but it seems that one section, including Sergeant E. P. Wootton and Corporal M. C. Ford, attacked with fixed bayonets some enemy posts just north of the cairn. These were taken but at least two men, Privates B. Hoppe and R. Bray, were wounded and there they had to lie, later caught up in a duel between the Valentines and one or two enemy tanks. 'I was very lucky,' says Hoppe (wounded in the spine), 'not to be hit by many hot red tomatoes from the tanks as I lay on the ground.'

No. 12 Platoon, following some distance behind No. 11, saw some enemy surrender to the tanks in front. Machine-gun fire from the right

flank sent the men to ground, but the platoon commander, Lieutenant G. J. B. ('Ben') Morris, soon had them on their feet again. 'I think it's only spent stuff,' he said; 'get up and walk.' Reed comments.... it didn't sound too spent to me'. Corporal E. R. Dix was carrying a bakelite grenade in his pocket when a bullet smashed it; he removed the detonator 'very gently and was glad to leave it on the ground.' Soon after this the platoon 'got amongst the Huns and four chaps under Keith Marshall <sup>3</sup> herded them up and started back with them.' This seems to have been some 150 yards past the earthworks around the cairn and against enemy who had not only been holding up 11 Platoon but had been bringing down heavy fire on Advanced Battalion Headquarters and those company vehicles being driven

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<sup>1</sup> Pte W. A. Bennett.

<sup>2</sup> Pte H. M. Shewan.

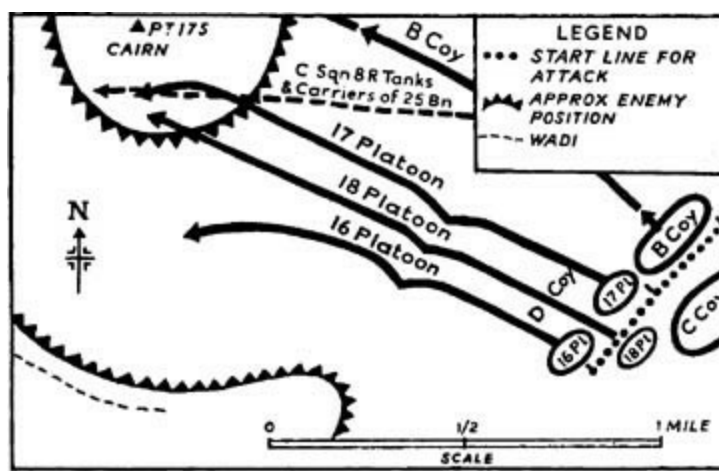
<sup>3</sup> Cpl W. K. Marshall.

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up to the forward area. But Morris's platoon, like Tredray's in front, could not linger under such fire on this open ground and had no option but to seek its source.

Not only was the advance on the left getting too fast, but D Company also tended to veer southwards, as though the tilt of the ground were sliding the platoons in that direction. In the words of the company commander, Major A. J. R. Hastie,

... when some 500 yards short of it [the objective] I noted with concern that the gap between D & B Coys was increasing considerably and as my left flank did not appear to be coming into enemy held ground I ordered an almost half right wheel by the two forward Platoons in order to help close the gap.



25 BATTALION: D COMPANY'S ATTACK

25 BATTALION: D COMPANY'S ATTACK

**Sam Brown, following somewhere behind Hastie, says: 'There was a general change of direction to half right with the outside left flank men running to keep up with the unexpected pivot.'**

**'The last 200–300 yards were covered by section rushes,' says Major Hastie, 'as considerable MG and rifle fire was being encountered.' Again, Lieutenant Handyside says: '... when about 100 yds off the enemy F.D.Ls<sup>1</sup> he opened up with spandaus and mortars and we started getting casualties. From here we went in rushes with sections covering each other and were soon about 25 yds from the Jerries, who started putting up their hands. I told the boys to run forward all together and take them prisoner. I got half way up myself when I got hit by a bullet which shattered my arm above the elbow, and knocked me head over heels.' During this last phase Sam Brown noticed that 'our men seemed to be drawing together in bunches'—a costly but human weakness, for men feel a sharp loneliness when under fire. Fortunately this lasted only for a few moments. In next to no time the fighting was over, the Germans standing in sorry groups, disheartened first by the tanks and carriers and then by the spirited attack of 16 and 17 Platoons. '... by the time we got there,' says Private Wolfe, 'there was not much fight left in them. All we had to do was to round them up and send them back with the walking wounded.'**

**No. 18 Platoon, under Lieutenant P. de V. Holt, 'a young officer who**

advanced coolly under fire in his first action without hesitation of any kind' (according to Private Pritchard), had meanwhile followed some distance behind. 'We crossed a yard wide strip of plough which ran along the entire front,' writes Private Greenlees, 'and no sooner were we over it than the enemy opened up with mortars, machine guns, and God knows what else. It was just a case of down and up and forward.' The enemy mortars opened fire just before the platoon drew level with a derelict tank 'and our 2/Lt. Holt scared us all by nearly knocking himself out by falling on his revolver,' says Pritchard. 'As we drew level with this [the derelict] there appeared to be bursts of machine gun fire... directly across us,' reports Private Gyde, a Bren gunner of the left section. 'As

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### <sup>1</sup> Forward Defended Localities.

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Lt Holt stood up to move forward with the platoon behind him he fell, whereon Sgt Tattersall <sup>1</sup> went to him, ordering me to open fire on the tank.' A sniper had lodged himself under this and Gyde gave him a few bursts with the Bren: 'To my satisfaction the gun remained silent afterwards though we didn't go over to investigate.' Holt was killed instantly and Tattersall now took command, but not for long; for he too was hit, though not badly. His place was taken by Lance-Corporal C. A. Corkhill, who in turn was hit—'a nasty shoulder wound'—soon after.

The mortar detachment plodded forward, 'still mixed up with the infantry', and Brown gives a warm description of enemy fire at this stage:

The scythe-like machinegun fire lifted and was immediately followed by an increase in mortar bombs... we were startled by a sharp command: 'Mortars! Where are the mortars?'

....Working frantically we had our gun set up in less than thirty seconds and commenced to drop bombs down the barrel while a cone of machinegun fire beat a pattern on the ground two yards in front of us....

No. 18 Platoon could see the enemy surrendering ahead and so, writes Pritchard, 'We ran the last few hundred yards in order to be in at the death and were in time to help with the disarming of the prisoners.' Private Greenlees 'arrived at the crest to find the enemy surrendering by the dozen. Already a large muster was grouped together and Colonel McNaught detailed some others and myself to escort them back.... As we left the battalion was going forward again. About a hundred yards back down the slope with the prisoners, we were fired on... and I was wounded in the arm.' Corporal G. H. Sampson of 18 Platoon was also in this:

... as the prisoners seemed to be rather neglected... I and two or three other chaps (one was big Percy Greenlees, about 16 stone) rounded them up and demanded that they dump any knives, etc. They were all pretty scared and complied readily enough. A few minutes after we set out for Bn HQ. We'd proceeded about two hundred yards when the counter attack broke loose. Being a brand new Lance Jack, I suppose my sense of duty was still a bit keen so I decided to make my way back to the section....

D Company began to settle in and Major Hastie 'asked for Pl trucks to be sent up with tools. D.R. arrived back... to say trucks would report shortly. At this stage things were fairly quiet, 16 Pl well out on left flank and 17 Pl were near me on right of position and 18 Pl... had come up into 17 Pl's area. I moved round and indicated areas to 17 & 18 Pls. During this I came across H. Gamlin and one other examining a small captured A/T gun. I told Gamlin to try and see if he could get it working and he said he thought he could....' Pritchard speaks at this stage of 'occasional fire from a point where the hills converged'. There was little cover, as Corporal D. S. G. Walker of 16 Platoon reports:

... we were ordered to dig in. Hopeless task—hard ground—no tools. Used small "holes" vacated by Germans no more than six inches deep.

But even this comparative haven was to be denied to D Company. At about 1.30 p.m. a despatch rider 'arrived to say I was to push on as the tanks would only be with us for another ten minutes', to quote Hastie's



report. Hardly had this order reached him than C Company arrived on the scene.

This company, under Captain Heslop, had only just got to the start line when the original advance was halted and the tanks committed. When the forward companies were about 600

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<sup>1</sup> L-Sgt T. L. Tattersall.

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yards ahead C Company set out, walking at case, with rifles slung, and meeting little or no enemy fire for the first 1000 yards or so. Lieutenant P. W. Robertshaw's 15 Platoon was forward on the right, Lieutenant W. E. W. Ormond's 13 Platoon left, and Lieutenant F. R. Porter's 14 Platoon in reserve. Heslop could see in the distance the prisoners being taken across to the right and later some of the tanks moving back in the same direction, one or two of them badly damaged —‘I passed beside one with about three feet of the barrel shot away,’ writes Corporal Eagan, ‘and another with the barrel completely distorted.’ Machine-gun fire increased as the company advanced ‘at a slow walking pace’. ‘It seemed that we were being fired on from the rear as well,’ continues Captain Heslop, ‘.... MG fire thickened up and forced us to move in leaps and bounds....’

Ormond, moving fairly well out on the left flank, was perturbed at the sight of a huge mass of vehicles about two miles to the left rear, but a more immediate menace was a ‘derelict’ tank —perhaps the same one from which Holt had been shot—which, according to Sergeant Huse, ‘came to life when we were right under its guns and caused heavy casualties.’ This was almost certainly the tank first engaged by Ryan's left section of K Troop, which he describes as follows:

I moved my section up with the Infantry until we were engaged with what I took at first to be a burnt out tank. We had noticed this tank for about an hour and there didn't seem to be any movement until he suddenly started to move. I moved my portees to attack him on either

flank and fortunately for us managed to knock him out.

Private H. H. Hanlen records that 13 Platoon's first casualty was about 'Halfway across the flat... Pte Wilson <sup>1</sup> hit in the thigh... surprised to hear later that he died of exposure....' Ormond moved with his left section and this seems to have swung well out to the south, where 'we came up with some remnants of D Coy under Cpl Quin. <sup>2</sup> They were fighting, or had been, against strong German positions on the left flank. The remainder of D Coy had gone straight on or had swung slightly right and were out of sight.' Here Ormond decided for the moment to stay, and his left and reserve sections—Huse's right section now being out of touch—moved through Quin's half dozen men. Quin, according to Ormond, 'was splendid, drawing a lot of fire but walking round to collect his men and explaining to me that we were on the edge of strong German positions.... I told Quin to withdraw through me... to Bn.... He must have been killed just after this....'

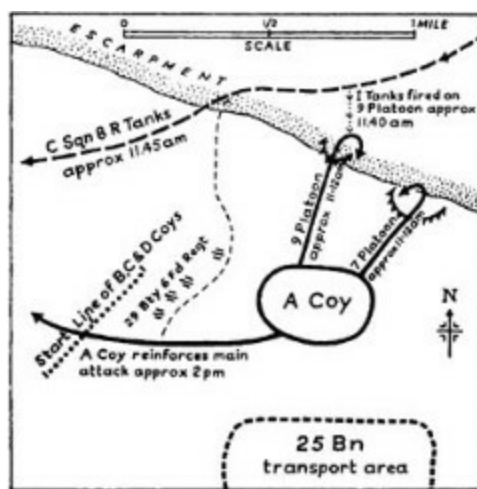
Meanwhile the centre and right of C Company had almost reached D Company. As 15 Platoon on the right drew level with Colonel McNaught, he ordered Lieutenant Robertshaw to 'accompany the [three] tanks with my platoon and go forward where there was now a very wide gap between the two forward companies....' So 15 Platoon departed. This left only 14 Platoon, Huse's section of 13 Platoon, and C Company Headquarters to support D Company, though Captain Heslop was as yet unaware that any of his company had been detached. Heslop met Hastie, who had just been ordered to continue the advance, and they decided that C Company—relatively intact as Heslop thought—should move through D, saving time and allowing a pause to Hastie's deserving men.

A Company and a section of carriers had been sent before the start of the attack to cover B Company's forming up and to clear cut pockets of the enemy which might be found below

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<sup>1</sup> Pte J. T. Wilson.

the escarpment to the right rear. No. 9 Platoon under Lieutenant J. R. G. Jack advanced towards the escarpment just east of the wadi containing the guns and was pinned down by a machine-gunner in a stone cairn on the edge until Private N. Petersen shot him dead. The platoon then reached the edge and descended to the flat below, which gave every sign of hurried evacuation but no sign of enemy, so Jack ordered his men back to the top. They were ascending when the squadron of Valentines approached from the north-east below to join the main attack, and although the recognition signal was given, the tanks opened fire, killing Privates J. H. Beattie and F. R. Leighton and wounding Private V. C. G. Hirst. Much shaken, no doubt, by this tragic incident, the platoon reported back to Company Headquarters, A Company having in the meantime been committed to the main attack. The other two platoons, 7 and 8, had already left, and 9 Platoon and Company Headquarters followed them to Advanced Headquarters, which had already moved up towards Hill 175. The struggle there was demanding all the strength 25 Battalion could muster.



25 BATTALION: A COMPANY'S  
OPERATIONS, 11 A.M. TILL 2 P.M.

25 BATTALION: A COMPANY'S OPERATIONS, 11 A.M. TILL 2 P.M.

**There were no covered approaches to the forward area and lorries**

bringing up ammunition had to drive over the same bullet-swept flats that the infantry had crossed only a few minutes before; for McNaught took his advanced headquarters forward at the earliest moment and reached the area 300-500 yards short of the cairn by 12.30 p.m., at which time D Company was still collecting prisoners and B Company had not yet drawn level. The vehicles with him were all perilously exposed to small-arms, anti-tank and mortar fire. One or two ammunition lorries were hit and as they burned their contents began to explode.

The Colonel himself seemed unperturbed, and many witnesses have testified to the encouragement they got from the sight of their commanding officer standing in the open or walking without hesitation no matter what fire came his way. They disagree about his headgear, which is variously described as a glengarry, a balaclava, a field service cap, or nothing at all; but they all agree about the pipe in his mouth and his unflinching courage.

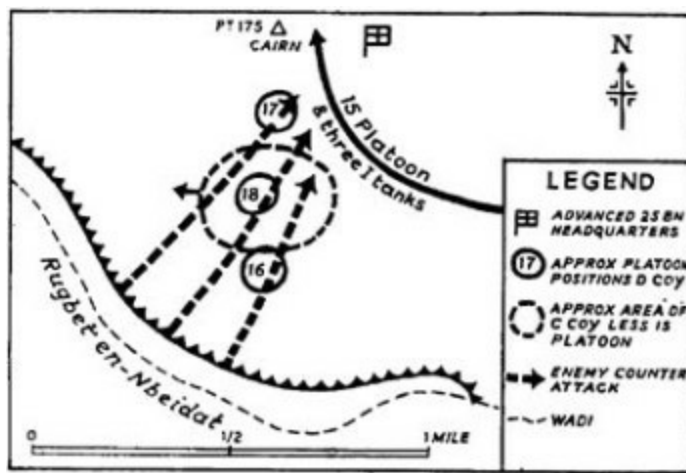
Despite the fire which met the vehicle group, Colonel McNaught had some reason for satisfaction with the situation he found. Strong enemy positions had been overrun and 'Our troops ... had got on pretty well.' It seemed to him that the enemy had been occupying mainly the eastern part of the feature, and this was already in his hands at comparatively small cost and long columns of prisoners were making for the rear. D Company was 'moving well towards the western part of the objective' and though B Company had been held up it was in no serious trouble. With C Company at hand and A Company at call, there were reserves enough for likely demands, and the tanks were still forward and their presence heartening. Yet 'it was obvious to me that we were most likely in for a sticky time.' He could soon see D Company 'at far end of objective and sent word to dig in if possible', but their position seemed exposed and he had a nagging suspicion that the cairn in front of him might not be Point 175 after all. When he heard from the tank officers that they intended to pull back in a few minutes for maintenance, the bleakness of the ground, this suspicion, and the impending departure of

**the sturdy Valentines prompted him to send word for Hastie to push on westwards. 'Their position was so darned exposed that I thought that anything was better than just staying there, and it would be better to get down and clear the waddy beyond.' When C Company drew level he was talking to the leader of a troop of three tanks, and he got him to thrust with Robertshaw's platoon into the gap between B and D Companies and to clear up any enemy around the cairn itself and in front of B Company. Within a few minutes this hopeful situation took a sudden turn for the worse.**

**The situation on the left, as CSM R. F. Thorpe of C Company saw it, was as follows:**

**We were at a burnt out truck near the left hand corner of a large sandhill.... Immediately we left the shelter of the sandhill the enemy fire became very intense and we suffered many casualties before passing through D Coy and taking up a position about 100 yards in advance of them. Here the fire appeared to come from our immediate front, left front, left side and even left rear. Targets were still not visible to our left but men could be seen to the front right (believed to be our own troops) and others moving from right to left and disappearing over the skyline into the wadi. These, I consider, were Germans....**

**Major Hastie, who also failed to locate the source of the fire, says: 'I could hear Heslop ordering "Cease fire on the left" and wondered why. I found out later he thought my men were somehow firing on his Company.' Some of D Company seem to have gone forward again just before or at the same time that C Company came up; for Private Gyde says: '... we had started to advance when we came under particularly heavy machine-gun fire.' Pritchard adds: 'We advanced once more and... [then] were pinned to the ground with a very intense automatic weapon fire. Personally I could not see where this was coming from and no one else was very sure either.**



25 BATTALION: C AND D COMPANIES  
OVERRUN BY TANKS

25 BATTALION: C AND D COMPANIES OVERRUN BY TANKS

**In the meantime our tanks had been recalled and we were stuck in an exposed position with no support, and rifle and bayonet our strongest weapon, because to man a Bren meant raising one's self to a position which was the signal for intense fire....' Wolfe says: 'Going forward again, things got pretty confused, our tanks knocked out, our anti-tank likewise, and we found ourselves surrounded, pinned to the ground by cross fire and out of touch with the other companies.' Furthermore, ammunition was getting low. 'We had set out,' says Private Hanlen, '... with our hundred rounds per man and the Bren guns four hundred rounds.... We finally went to ground after routing out a few machine gun posts. Some of our chaps firing from them—fortunate in having a bit of cover; they were the only ones who did. The enemy**

**was approx 75 yds from us and it was good shooting while it lasted and it did not last long. Our 100 rounds soon ran out and then it was a case of wait and see....'**

**This, then, was the setting for the next stage of the drama: exposed positions, fiendishly heavy and close machine-gun and mortar fire from the seemingly empty desert, and next to no ammunition. Hastic sent a runner, Private T. C. Taylor, to Colonel McNaught to say he was pinned down by heavy fire from the left flank. Except for a few 'very shallow holes and clumps of tussock' there was no cover. Then Sergeant H. C.**

**Blackburn of 16 Platoon reported that Lieutenant Handyside had been wounded. 'We were lying in a shallow depression,' says Hastic, 'and I was giving him the situation as I knew it when he [Blackburn] was killed.' There was still no way of knowing whence the fire was coming and Hastic was as mystified about this as any of his men, but he soon had the answer: '... shortly after this I observed the top of a tank appearing over the ground out on the left flank. This gradually came into full view, followed, by two others in echelon formation.' These tanks advanced slowly in bounds, with infantry following closely. Miles Handyside, lying wounded in the open, saw the Germans counter-attack 'with one tank that I saw and plenty of Infantry.' Then he watched a brave action by one of the battalion Bren carriers, which 'fought a good rearguard here, slowly giving ground and firing single shots all the time from its gun.' Hastic saw either this or another which 'came up to my area and then moved round to the rear and back towards Battalion HQ. It drew a considerable amount of fire.'**

**The same curve of the ground which had first hidden the tanks from C and D Companies still hid them from Ryan's two portées which were level with Advanced Headquarters, and so there was no effective fire which could be directed against these tanks. Or almost no fire; for 'Hughie' Gamlin had been working on the little anti-tank gun which had been found on the position and had turned it to face the enemy. Corporal Sampson has reconstructed what he thinks ensued: 'There was a small Jerry gun with a short barrel poking out through a sheet of plating, pointing towards me but behind most of our boys... Having got a round away at the tank, Hugh did the most natural thing and took a quick look over the shield to see if he'd scored a hit. Jerry was just one jump ahead and guessed that is what would happen; he was also a good man with a rifle.' And so Gamlin died, and the last slim chance of defeating the tanks died with him. For most of C and D Companies there was now no hope, but this fact took some time to dawn on the men. Hastic told those around him to fire on the enemy infantry when they could, and Sergeant J. E. Caldwell of 17 Platoon 'coolly got an officer'. The remaining carriers moved over to help D Company but could do no**

more than send a few bursts of Bren-gun fire into the enemy infantry and retreat before the tanks. The platoon commander's carrier had to withdraw when its driver, Private Grant, 'stopped a lump of shrapnel in the back' <sup>1</sup> and had to be evacuated, and shortly afterwards the other carriers had to refuel.

As Hanlen notes: 'We did not have to wait long. The enemy realised our position and brought up three tanks (our own with Huns in) and they soon put an end to things, spraying the ground and running the boys over.' Heslop writes that the tanks 'moved forward slowly, followed

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<sup>1</sup> According to himself; it must have been a big lump because Pte H. R. Mackenzie saw him back at the RAP and says he had 'half his right shoulder blade torn to ribbons'.

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LOOKING EAST FROM POINT 175 SHOWING THE GROUND  
OVER WHICH THE ATTACK WAS MADE

**LOOKING EAST FROM POINT 175 SHOWING THE GROUND OVER WHICH THE ATTACK  
WAS MADE**





Colonel G. J. McNaught addressing officers and NCOs of 25 Battalion  
at Baggush before the battle

**Colonel G. J. McNaught addressing officers and NCOs of 25 Battalion at [Baggush](#) before the battle**

Enemy shells landing in 6 Brigade's area near Sidi Rezegh



**Enemy shells landing in 6 Brigade's area near [Sidi Rezegh](#)**



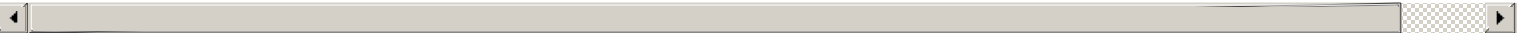
Colonel C. Shuttleworth of  
24 Battalion (left),  
General Freyberg, and  
Brigadier H. E. Barrowclough

**Colonel C. Shuttleworth of 24 Battalion (left), General Freyberg, and Brigadier H. E. Barrowclough**



Lieutenant C. H. Cathie, who  
the MC in this attack, and Serg  
H. R. Martin who won the D

**Lieutenant C. H. Cathie, who won the MC in this attack, and Sergeant H. R. Martin who won the DCM**





Three privates of A Company, 25 Battalion, who took part in this attack. (From left to right) J. H. Archer (killed), K. B. Neilsen, and J. V. Bevan (wounded)

**Three privates of A Company, 25 Battalion, who took part in this attack. (From left to right) J. H. Archer (killed), K. B. Neilsen, and J. V. Bevan (wounded)**



GERMAN TANKS near Point 175

from a German photograph captured at the Blockhouse two days after the action

**GERMAN TANKS near point 175**  
**from a German photograph captured at the Blockhouse two day after the action**



A 25-pounder of 6 Field Regiment firing in this campaign

by a few German infantry, and proceeded to inflict heavy casualties on us with MG fire.... We eliminated a few of the infantry.... Then on my left where the tanks were nearest, my chaps and those of D Coy surrendered.... there was no available route for withdrawal. I looked back for any reinforcements but could not see any moving up [he had been promised some shortly before]. Each time I moved to have another look-see I remember MG bursts welcomed me at most uncomfortably close quarters. The right hand tanks continued to move in, whereupon the remainder of us surrendered. I gave no orders to surrender apart from saying to my runner, L/Cpl T. [E. A.] Eagan, "Looks like we've had it."

Few soldiers, before action, seriously think of being captured by the enemy, a contingency which, unless it actually arrives, seems impossibly remote. So capture finds them quite unprepared for the act of surrender or the ensuing captivity. Thus Hastie saw the tanks pass through 16 Platoon, 'some of whom I saw get up with their hands up', and he comments: 'This rather shook me at the time.' The tanks still came on and more men put their hands up. 'When the leading tank was about 30-40 yards from where I was I very reluctantly told those around me that they had better do so too as I could see nothing else for it. I then buried my maps and papers and followed suit, noting Heslop getting to his feet too.... Fortyseven of D Coy were taken then including nine walking wounded.' One of the wounded was Corporal Walker who was

using a German spandau machine gun. He says: 'Owing to its height above ground etc. I and the gun were hit by a burst from tank No. I which could not have been more than 50 yards from me.'

Thorpe, who may have got a good distance farther west with part of C Company, says that the final advance 'brought us to within 200 yards of the edge of the wadi. By this time all sign of troops, to our right front, had disappeared; but a definite target, Germans, was visible to our immediate front (on the edge of the wadi) and could be seen advancing in short bursts to our left front, left side and left rear. From this stage the remains of the Coy were pinned to the ground by very heavy small arms fire and replied as best they could. Unfortunately the number of targets was far too many for the number of men remaining.'

With Thorpe when he surrendered was Private A. H. Annis, whose battle-dress jacket at the back 'looked as if rats had chewed it.' Private Moynihan's view of these last minutes is typical and his last sentence haunting:

.... there were tanks all around us.... things were a bit hazy and the next thing I knew we were marching back behind the Jerry lines. We had done our best with what we had to fight with and it was not our fault we had been taken.

Ormond's two sections of 13 Platoon must have been captured about the same time, from his description of what happened after he relieved Quin's section of D Company:

Settled my 2 Sections in German slit trenches and told Sgt Brown Bayliss we'd have to hold the position. Then went forward a bit with my runner, Pte A. Scott.

40 or 50 Germans stood up and surrendered 150 yards away so started over towards them when they didn't obey my signal to come over. Then I noticed a whole lot more huns lying ready to fire, and also a tank which I hadn't noticed before which was giving us occasional bursts; so got back smartly to the rest of the platoon—Scott killed

**somewhere here by bursts from tank.**

**Back with his men Ormond was quickly embroiled in a heavy exchange of fire, during which he moved from post to post, not only to encourage his men but to make use of whatever he could find in the way of enemy small arms; for .303 ammunition was at a premium. Thinking back on this he says: 'The Germans [who had originally manned these posts] must have been pretty rattled. I used a dozen of their rifles in different trenches and most sights were still at 1200 to 1400 metres.' But the end was in sight:**

**We hung on there till I was knocked out by a trench mortar, the Germans advancing a bit as we got short of men and ammunition.**

**When I came to the Germans were in possession, none of our men about and no firing close by. I lay quiet in my trench until dark.**

**Sergeant Brown-Bayliss, among others, was killed and most of the survivors captured.**

**The captives from C and D Companies were quickly marched off down the wadi which curled round from left to front and saw no more of the battle at close hand. In the years of captivity which faced them they did not even have the consolation of knowing that at least two of the three tanks which overran them were knocked out within a few minutes. Ryan's two portees, in Sam Brown's words, 'dashed up, in reverse, about 100 yards to our left rear.... we heard dull... thuds as their shots hit home.' Ryan saw it as follows:**

**.... we noticed a light tank (Italian I think) followed by a Valentine flying our recognition signals. It was difficult for us to decide whether the Valentine was firing at the Italian tank or not. We engaged the Italian tank at about 500 yards with both guns and he didn't fire another shot—we must have killed the gunner-but he kept rolling to within about 50 yards of us, finally going up in flames. K4. continued pumping shells into him until he stopped.... I switched the fire of K3 to the Valentine,**

having decided he was hostile and we were greatly helped by two members of the 25th Battalion who lobbed two sticky bombs with good results. This tank was knocked out but I think the honours should go to the infantry.

At this point Brown saw Colonel McNaught dash up in his staff car to 'about half-way between us and the forward troops.' The mortar detachment then felt 'a passionate desire to be useful' and drove up to him, noticing as they drew alongside, that 'he was wounded in the leg and limping badly'. The mortar was quickly set up and the Colonel directed its fire. It was soon joined by another gun from the reserve detachment and 'we put over a positively terrific support fire ranging from 800 to 1200 yards for the counter attacking reserve infantry who were moving up through us [A Company].... a glorious release from our previous feelings of helplessness and frustration.... [the enemy's] fire decreased... until there was only to be heard an occasional rattle of machinegun fire from well in front.'

Robertshaw, as he led 15 Platoon towards the right, was unaware of what was happening behind him; his eyes were on the three tanks in front and it was all he could do to keep up with them. They 'went off', he says, 'at a pace which soon carried us well forward, and during the advance we did not see any enemy, although we must have passed along the front of a strong enemy position.' When he reached the escarpment things began to happen quickly. All three tanks were disabled 'immediately by an anti-tank gun and a Mark III tank just below the top of the escarpment. We engaged and killed the crew of the anti-tank gun. The tank came to the top and then backed down again and we heard it move away again, much to our relief.'

Private J. M. Simonsen of No. 9 Section saw all this as follows:

For a few minutes we were unmolested, then quickly came under heavy fire. We were given orders to charge, which we did. Came to earth after covering some sixty yards....

Perhaps 30 or 40 yards away on our left front were 3 I tanks, all disabled but still fighting with all they had. The nearness of these with the resulting heavy fire, quickly made our position untenable. However when the order came to withdraw, I had already become a casualty, a bullet having passed through my foot....

Gradually this fragment of action fits into the jigsaw puzzle; for surely this action between our tanks and the enemy tank was that which Private Hoppe saw while lying wounded on the ground somewhere north of the cairn. And if so it seems likely that some of 11 Platoon had already pushed past here on their way westwards and that 12 Platoon was not far short of this point.

Robertshaw ordered his platoon to withdraw:

Once on their feet the sections drew a hail of small arms fire, and were practically all killed or wounded. Those who were not killed lay up in unoccupied enemy positions... until forty hours later.... I believe a few of the walking wounded did come out and found our lines on the night of the 23rd.... The few still fit stayed with the badly wounded.

Robertshaw himself and Sergeant Connor got out 'by a lot of luck' by taking cover behind the tanks, and two privates also reported back. Simonsen stayed, for he could not walk. He, too, reports the tragic end of 15 Platoon: 'Upon the order to withdraw, several soldiers rose to be immediately shot down.' Others 'gradually dispersed' and he was left to watch 'the tanks —still fighting—until one was hit directly by an artillery shell. This could be heard coming and landed on the turret of the tank immediately in front of my position, setting the tank on fire. The crew... evacuated the blazing tank, although I fear that none of them escaped wounds or death, owing to the enemy machine guns.'

To fit this action of 15 Platoon into B Company's movements, bearing in mind the limited viewpoints of those who took part and the urgent and terrible distractions they suffered, is now difficult. For one thing, Cathie's platoon was absorbed in its deadly game above and below



the escarpment and lost all count of time or thought of the other platoons. And 11 and 12 Platoons met such a storm of fire on the plateau that those who remained on their feet scarcely knew what was happening. Bellerby, before he was hit, recalls seeing Colonel McNaught some 300 yards to the south. He carried on for perhaps 300 yards, which must surely have taken him somewhere past the cairn and possibly a long way past, for he says that there was a wadi 'about 100 yds ahead and the ground dipped steeply out of sight and apparently it was in this wadi that the enemy infantry were dug in.' He stopped a bullet in the leg and there he lay in a slight hollow for the next four hours.

Actually after I was hit the fire eased off somewhat. By this time our advancing troops were out of sight. An RAP bloke came up and dressed our wounds and then he too disappeared forward.

Half an hour or an hour later some of A Company debussed at the crest behind him and carried on past him on foot.

Thanks mainly to Private Reed, the story of 12 Platoon is clearer, though the farthest point of their advance is not known. After the capture of the prisoners, perhaps 150 yards past the cairn, he says:

Continued our advance for another 500 yards or so till things got very hot. Went down. Ben Morris hit in the upper leg, Bernie Willis, <sup>1</sup> Bren gunner, killed, McLauchlan <sup>2</sup> hit, I got one through the arm. Ammo, getting low. Three tanks hit in front of us and knocked out and began to burn. Saw the crew of one surrender. Seem to have lost contact with our own crowd. We had rightly inclined before going down and were fired on from all sides, even our rear. Sgt Harry Martin <sup>3</sup> now in charge.

Were the three tanks Reed saw those which Robertshaw had accompanied? It seems likely, though there were plenty of others knocked out by this time. At all events the platoon was now

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<sup>1</sup> Pte B. G. Willis.

<sup>2</sup> Pte G. K. McK. McLauchlan.

<sup>3</sup> Sgt H. R. Martin.

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without tank support and its inspiring commander, Lieutenant Morris, another young officer in his first action, was mortally wounded. Not many men remained on their feet, and these few were concerned not only about the enemy who seemed to be all round them but about their wounded whom they were loath to leave in the open under such fire. There were too few to continue the advance and at the same time care for the wounded; these few became still fewer as more men were hit, and there was nothing for it but to withdraw—a hard enough task as it was. Enemy fire could not be subdued for lack of Bren ammunition and the situation for the few survivors was grave.

Reed in his curiously detached way tells this story without frills:

Slight escarpment to our front and right flank but we couldn't get to the lip of it but could hear a lot of row and heard a tank [perhaps the same one which had menaced 15 Platoon] on our right flank. O. Wilson who had taken over the bren crawled over to me with it. He had had a jam. I cleared it and took it over. Had to pull back. Some of the chaps carried Ben back while I covered them then I made a dash and relied on them. When we got back a bit found McLauchlan had not come. His pal Pete Easton <sup>1</sup> ran back to him and tried to bring him back but found him blinded. Germans advancing so had to leave him. Retired further. A captured German RAP chap did what he could for Ben but he died. McDonnell <sup>2</sup> was hit (lost a foot) and Brownie <sup>3</sup> killed.

At last reached some of our own chaps and got some ammo from B2 [a company lorry] which charged up but was stopped by a mortar or something of that nature.

Let us leave 12 Platoon for a while in this terrible and wonderful setting wherein, as a matter of course, a man goes back into torment for

the sake of a friend or stays there alone to cover the others—and such things can be described as though you or I or the man next door would have done the same. Well we might, but there lurks a secret and frightening doubt not apparent to Reed; for such deeds were this day the rule and not the exception.

Not far away, for example, from where we leave 12 Platoon, another action had been fought by KI, the leading two-pounder of Muirhead's right anti-tank section. This gun, under Sergeant F. Seifert, came under 'fairly severe machine gun fire' but continued to trail the leading infantry by about 200 yards, which made the prominent portée more attractive to enemy marksmen than the thin line of infantry bounding forward and then falling flat among the scrub. Then KI 'engaged a tank', as Muirhead says, 'and forced the crew to evacuate same. It did not catch fire although badly damaged.' Another hundred yards forward the gun engaged a machine-gun position, firing about ten shots. 'K1 then received 2 more or less direct hits by mortars which put the gun and portée out of action but did not damage the crew.' Colonel McNaught appeared and Muirhead told him K1 was out of action and suggested bringing up K2. The reply was: 'No!, you are infantry now! Forward!' 'So forward we went,' says Muirhead, 'about 25 yards and were engaged by machine guns which wounded Frank Seifert and myself. Seifert was badly hit and could not be moved. Nobody could move—the bullets were clipping the grass about 12" above the ground.' But Muirhead did crawl back a short way and got a Bren carrier to pick up Seifert. K2 must have been following to the right, near the escarpment, for it too engaged 'a large tank which came up over the escarpment and blew the turret off it', according to Gunner W. Kelly, who was the layer and pressed the trigger. 'This tank burned and was a complete write off,' he adds. 'K2 then engaged another smaller tank at short range and blew the turret off it. This one did not burn.' There is no telling how soon the one followed

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<sup>1</sup> Pte A. N. Easton.

<sup>2</sup> Pte J. W. McDonnell.

<sup>3</sup> Pte R. R. Brown.

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the other and so these engagements must be lightly superimposed upon the whole picture of B Company at this stage.

Artillery support was, as it happened, one of the problems of this attack. There were for one thing only eight field guns when a full regiment of twenty-four would have been less than enough. Then the enemy lay low and held his fire until the attacking infantry were too close for artillery support, so the observation officers had to engage more distant targets. <sup>1</sup> Observing on the left flank, Captain J. Molloy could only bring down fire on the wadi—Rugbeten-Nbeidat—to the south and west of the hill and the area of the Blockhouse beyond. One closer target was the Valentine in enemy hands which engaged his truck with machine-gun fire and on which he called down fire from his own B Troop guns with little effect. This was destroyed, as has been told, by K3 and K4. Captain F. E. Fisher on the right was luckier; for he had the only artillery Bren carrier, equipped with wireless set, and was able to get closer forward. He ‘liquidated a mortar position’, according to Wilson, ‘but not before a near miss wounded his driver rather seriously in the shoulder and caused minor damage to the carrier.’ Fisher reported this to his battery commander over the air, doubting if he could teach himself to drive the carrier, and was told by Major Wilson that he ‘would not learn younger’; so he mastered the controls while under fire from machine guns and mortars, saying afterwards that it was ‘not a pastime he can recommend.’

So although Captain McBride was ‘unable at any stage to make contact with the Arty’, and Major Burton of Headquarters Company who came up soon after the attack started found him ‘a most worried man owing to lack of arty support’, the gunners were doing their best and Fisher was well forward, unknown to McBride, directing the fire of A

**Troop wherever he thought it would help B Company. Molloy was doing the same for the left flank with B Troop. But in each case four guns were now covering a front of well over half a mile, and so their fire was sparse.**

**Where the shortage of guns was particularly felt was in dealing with the 'Well placed Machine Guns covering A/T Guns' (to quote McNaught's own account) on the edge of the escarpment or in its re-entrants. No. 10 Platoon was dealing with these as it came to them but Cathie could have done with some help, especially after he was 'pipped through the shoulder' and could no longer use his rifle. Nos. 11 and 12 Platoons also tended to face north rather than west in response to this threat. McBride asked for reinforcement, but McNaught thought the left the critical flank and told him 'to hang on without help.'**

**Major Burton walked forward with his batman (his truck had been shot up that morning) to report to Colonel McNaught and found that 'A number of vehicles had advanced perilously too far forward.... I ordered several trucks back a few hundred yds.... Bren carriers were doing a grand job but were smashed like pieces of crockery. Tommy guns, hand grenades and bayonets were coming into operation.... the fire of enemy weapons swept the area....' McNaught's own headquarters was now under fierce fire and the Colonel himself was hit at about 1.15 p.m. and again a quarter of an hour later. Shortly after that the Intelligence Officer and Signals Officer, Lieutenants M. J. T. Frazer and G. Colledge, were also wounded. Burton continues:**

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**<sup>1</sup> After the initial programme had been halted at five past twelve by Colonel McNaught because the shells were landing among our tanks.**

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**.... The CO had advanced his headquarters... very close to the trig point. The fire... was terrific, the trucks being riddled.... The two wireless operators were killed.... The Intelligence Officer stretched out across a Bren carrier looked a shocking sight and as I gave him a wave and a**

**cheerio I thought I had seen him for the last time.**

**In the respite gained by the mortars on the left flank McNaught sent a despatch rider <sup>1</sup> with orders for A Company to come up at once. Meanwhile he found the few remaining carriers 'of great assistance, as I was able to reinforce the threatened points, and they continued to do excellent work, and undoubtedly kept back the enemy.' Between half past one and two o'clock McNaught was also busy rallying several small parties which fell back towards his advanced headquarters and sending them back towards the escarpment. Fire in this area was intense and McNaught was wounded for the third time, and in the other leg, about 1.45 p.m. and was much weakened by loss of blood. He was nevertheless, in the words of Brigadier Barrowclough, 'most active in organising his defensive position' in the crisis which followed the loss of two of his four rifle companies. The fighting strength of 25 Battalion was already, after only two hours, reduced by more than half, and McNaught reported accordingly to the Brigadier about two o'clock; Barrowclough undertook to send him a company of 24 Battalion and a platoon of **27 MG Battalion**.**

**Meanwhile A Company of 25 Battalion was being brought up in lorries (except for 8 Platoon, which came up on foot) and it debussed under fire somewhere near Advanced Battalion Headquarters about a quarter past two. Captain W. H. Roberts, the company commander, made his reconnaissance under 'terrific mortar and machine gun fire', according to Burton, 'to find the best line of attack.' Then A Company attacked 'up the left centre,' says McNaught, 'reached the remnants of D Coy and stabilised the position.' But this is a more sanguine view than that, for example, of Lieutenant Jack, who says:**

**We were hurriedly deployed and proceeded with the advance.... Platoons came under fire immediately. Advance continued by short bounds.... 7 and 9 Platoons finally pinned down by fire from enemy tank which remained stationary ... believed to be out of action. Tank then moved up and attempted to run over our troops who were prone on the ground. Our anti tank guns then obtained direct hits on the tank and put it out of**

**action. (I was wounded very soon after this incident.)**

**The enemy was only 150 yards ahead, and a Bren carrier which came up with ammunition paused to engage machine guns at that range before carrying Jack and four other wounded back to the rear. Jack had been wounded three times according to Sergeant T. P. Winter, who took over 9 Platoon. Winter led his men forward until pinned down by tank fire. The earlier action on the escarpment had used up much small-arms ammunition and the platoon could no longer reply to the fire which raked it. Winter says 'grenades and sticky bombs were used, without effect, in an endeavour to push past the enemy tanks.' Winter himself was then wounded in chest and arms and Lance-Corporal C. H. G. Howell was killed when he stood up to dress Winter's wounds. Only the wounded sergeant and five men of 9 Platoon remained in action. No. 8 Platoon, under Lieutenant Bruce Campbell, fared slightly better as a whole, but its 4 Section**

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**<sup>1</sup> This DR was probably Pte J. B. Kinder, who had already proved himself by repairing his motor cycle under fire; again he had it 'shot away from under him' (to quote the citation for his MM); and, converting a German machine to his own use, he finally had this, too, disabled by enemy fire. 'He, together with his friend [Pte W. H.] Bill Morton, did a great job,' says Maj Burton.**

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**under Lance-Sergeant T. G. ('Tazz') Taylor came under deadly fire from the left and lost Corporal A. A. MacAulay and Privates J. D. Hogan and I. M. Newlands killed at the outset. So A Company paid a terrible price for its intervention and lost half its men within a few minutes; Captain Roberts was wounded, and to the men on the spot the left flank looked anything but stable. The most comforting addition to the defence here were two Vickers guns which, according to Burton, 'poured volumes of fire into the enemy.'<sup>1</sup>**

**If the left flank gave some appearance of solidity at this stage the right was unmistakably fluid, and Burton spent most of his time there,**



trying to sort things out. 'There were quite a number of lightly wounded men and others who had lost their officers and n.c.o.s and who were just moving back to the rear,' he says. 'These I ordered into position just over the edge of the escarpment and we established a two platoon front. I sent a messenger back to bring forward every available man from HQ Coy.' This group of men was very likely that at which we left 12 Platoon after the death of Ben Morris. Sergeant Martin was now, as Reed has told us, in command of this gallant band, whose thin ranks were to be reduced still more. Reed continues:

Colonel McNaught turned up and asked what had happened, then ordered us to attack again. Went over to our right to the edge of the escarpment and attacked up there. Jim Granville <sup>2</sup> hit and died [four days later; Burton picked him up the next night], Len Suff <sup>3</sup> killed, J. Walker <sup>4</sup> killed, Jeromson <sup>5</sup> killed.

Then Reed, whose matter-of-fact narrative has already taken us through more death and desolation than most men know in a lifetime, describes with warm admiration an action he witnessed. Others might be brave, we must infer, but for him and those with him there was just a job of work to be done:

Before this action we had been told that one of our I tanks had been captured by the Germans... Col McNaught was walking over to it as though to give the crew orders when it opened up with machine guns. I then saw one of the coolest things of that day. Close to me was a 2-lb anti-tank gun up on its portee. It had been facing our front but when the tank opened up I saw the Sergeant in charge slowly circling with his hand giving the driver instructions to back and turn the truck. They then went into action and the first shot snapped off the wireless aerial of the tank. These chaps were stuck up on the tray of the portee and under heavy machine-gun fire all the time. (The regular gunner [gun-layer] had been hit while the portee was turning.) The tank scuttled back down the escarpment and the portee backed to the edge and finished it off.



**We advanced a bit and then Capt McBride was hit.... Pete Easton took over the Bren from me as my arm was stiffening up and I was feeling a bit weak.... <sup>6</sup>**

**Infiltration below the escarpment reached the level of a serious counter-attack and Cathie picked out a position for a do-or-die stand against it: ‘we were fairly exposed,’ he wrote, ‘but this point simply had to be held. Here I lost two corporals killed (Cpl F. Beamsley and L/Cpl A. McK. Black), and the RAP orderly was shot next to me. All these men had been splendid throughout and were always there when wanted.’ When the survivors of 11 and 12 Platoons joined 10 Platoon, as they now did, Lieutenant D. A. Wilson took command—‘a short, dark, sturdy man,’ Cathie says, ‘the coolest, quietest, best soldier there.’**

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**<sup>1</sup> ‘Where these guns came from no one seemed to know,’ says Burton, ‘but they did a wonderful job in supporting this attack and won the admiration of all....’ These formed a section of 9 Platoon, 27 MG Bn. McNaught says they arrived later, but whatever time they came, the machine-gunners certainly deserved the praise; for this bare terrain offered them little cover and their fire was too damaging to remain unchallenged. The other section of two guns supported the right flank along the escarpment.**

**<sup>2</sup> Pte J. Granville.**

**<sup>3</sup> Pte L. E. C. Suff.**

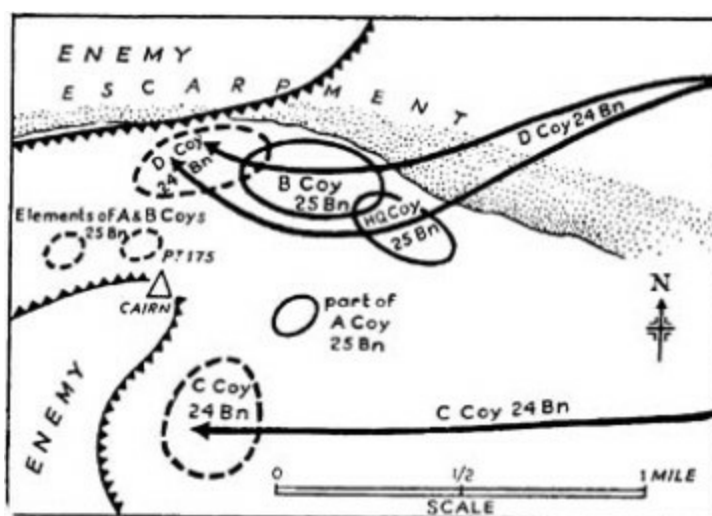
**<sup>4</sup> Cpl J. R. Walker.**

**<sup>5</sup> Pte J. R. Jeromson.**

**<sup>6</sup> Sgt Martin was awarded the DCM for the period when he commanded 12 Platoon.**

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Brigadier Barrowclough sent up not one company of 24 Battalion, as promised, but two. The first of these, D Company, reached the scene between 3.15 and 3.30 p.m. and was at once committed on the right. Then Colonel C. Shuttleworth of 24 Battalion arrived to take over from Colonel McNaught, of whom the Brigadier says: ‘... it was with difficulty that he was persuaded to go back to the dressing station.’ McNaught briefed his successor— ‘I am afraid rather incoherently’—and then went back for medical treatment. <sup>1</sup> Shuttleworth left orders for his C Company, when it arrived, to support the left flank and himself moved over to the escarpment where his D Company was heavily engaged.



24 AND 25 BATTALIONS: THE LATE AFTERNOON

24 AND 25 BATTALIONS: THE LATE AFTERNOON

Meanwhile Major Burton, not knowing of these arrangements, assumed command of 25 Battalion when he heard that McNaught had gone and picked for his command post a shallow bomb hole on the flat above the escarpment. There, with his batman, Private G. S. ('Taffy') Ringwood, he endured a few minutes of careful and accurate attention from an enemy mortar. Taffy, who had so far stuck loyally at his side, 'became restless, he was absolutely sick of this bomb crater, and he was all for evacuating'; but he stayed. Then, when Burton was about to leave this area, a hail of bullets whistled overhead and looking along the edge of the escarpment we could see khaki forms crawling towards us. Another burst ripped through and nearby I heard a man moan. Sgt

Atkins,<sup>2</sup> my AA platoon Sgt, had been hit rather badly, then one of our guns replied. When the enemy came a little closer we all held our fire for the attackers were none other than a portion of a company of the 24 Bn who had been sent round the right flank of the Bn to help us.

How many needless casualties were caused by this misunderstanding will never be known; for few men on either side of this sharp exchange were clear as to what was happening. It was probably only a handful, though no less tragic for that, and it could have lasted for only a matter of moments; for the newcomers were quickly and heavily involved with the same enemy B Company had been fighting so bitterly all afternoon.

The new D Company, under Captain H. H. McDonald, had come up quickly in lorries, only too anxious to help. From midday, when they first heard the battle ahead, they had been restive, as Private E. E. Heyber of 18 Platoon confirms:

.... We waited for orders to advance. Our officer Mr Thompson<sup>3</sup> kept coming to us and saying 'We should not wait—we are wanted up there; I am certain they can't get word back.'

Heyber himself was hit by a mortar fragment in the first mad rush. Private R. E. Till, also of D Company, has a terse entry in his pocket diary: 'Heavy M.G. fire as we debussed—Point 175.' Private W. R. A. Shakespear of 16 Platoon adds some details: 'We moved forward at short

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<sup>1</sup> McNaught was awarded the DSO and Cathie the MC for this action.

<sup>2</sup> L-Sgt S. W. Atkins.

<sup>3</sup> Capt H. Thompson. 24 Bn, like 25 Bn, had 13, 14 and 15 Platoons in C Coy and 16, 17 and 18 in D Coy.

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intervals,' he says, 'frequently going to ground. A tank came towards

us.... [then] moved back down a wadi not far from some enemy tents. We advanced across this shallow wadi, it was covered with casualties, the fire being murderous. Pte B. Mottram made his way to the edge of the escarpment. The noise was terrific. He passed a knocked out Spandau and crew and moved over the edge, joining Pte Morgan <sup>1</sup> and others who were down among the rocks. They were caught by fire. Mottram gave one last burst of fire from his Tommy gun before turning back, then was killed. Morgan was wounded while making his way back.... Both these soldiers were of fine character.'

Private R. Heath, manning a two-inch mortar in 16 Platoon, says:

.... we advanced through murderous machine gun and mortar fire. Andy Lees <sup>2</sup> was the first chap I saw get hit, shortly after we went to ground and 'Darkie' Lewis <sup>3</sup> and I were busy with our weapon.... Just before we ran out of mortar ammunition Lewis was killed and then 'Bluey' Cains <sup>4</sup> helped me.... During the action I saw W. D. Friday [D Company runner] come running across the desert, shout out his message, and run back, the bullets clipping sand at his heels as he ran.

Then Heath 'collected it in the back' but stayed on the job until dark. Casualties were heavy all through the company—at least two killed, as we have seen, in 16 Platoon; Privates T. Green, A. Gibson, J. V. Morgan and C. C. Davey killed in 17 Platoon; and, within a few minutes of the start, Captain McDonald himself and his batman, Private G. Absolum. 'In the meantime D Company was held down under fire,' says Shakespear; 'Capt MacDonald (Happy Mac) stood up to size up the position, when I looked again he had fallen.' This was a sad loss; but the company pushed on. Shakespear continues: 'We advanced to the edge of the escarpment, but the fire was heavy and we had to withdraw a few chains. While at the edge Pte McClintock <sup>5</sup> was wounded and sent back. He was reluctant to go.'

Several D Company men mention an anti-tank action which sounds very much like that which Reed admired; but it could not have been the same unless Reed mistook Colonel Shuttleworth for McNaught, who had

long since left the scene. Gunner Kelly describes it as follows:

At dusk Col Shuttleworth came over and asked K2 to engage a tank down the escarpment. K2 moved over the crest ... and in three shots demolished this tank which went up in flames.

In moving over the crest ... back to its position K2 came under heavy MG fire and Sgt Joe Prisk was killed instantly....

Kelly, himself slightly wounded, took command of the gun.

D Company of the 24th and the survivors of B and HQ Companies of the 25th, however, gradually subdued the enemy on the right flank and firing decreased towards dusk. On the left it had flared up strongly in the late afternoon and A Company, down to half strength, was heavily pressed and almost overwhelmed, as were C and D Companies earlier on much the same ground. And the advanced headquarters which McNaught had set up was still under terrible fire and now without officers at all. As Captain E. K. Tomlinson, commanding C Company of the 24th, saw it, 'all that remained were a few signallers who were packing up and getting out.' He gained the impression that 25 Battalion was 'badly demoralised and disorganised and their men were streaming off Point 175 hotly pursued by the enemy.' This was, however, a local view; he knew nothing of Lieutenant B. R. Henderson's group to his right front, nor did he reach

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<sup>1</sup> 1Pte G. M. Morgan.

<sup>2</sup> L-Cpl A. G. Lees.

<sup>3</sup> Pte L. M. Lewis.

<sup>4</sup> Pte E. W. Cains.

<sup>5</sup> Pte C. McClintock.

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**them that day; and he could not know of the bitter struggle on the right. He continues:**

**I decided that the best way to assist the remnants of 25 Bn was to stage an attack on Pt 175 with my own Coy, hoping that the sight of fresh troops would help 25 Bn to reorganise and establish a line.**

**So Tomlinson went back to meet his C Company, which had been driving forward, and put this plan into effect, telling his men to 'go to ground and hold a defensive position on the reverse slope of 175' if enemy fire were too damaging, to give 25 Battalion time to reorganise.**

**All this, of course, took place in a matter of minutes, and Tomlinson had no time to ponder about a group of enemy tanks which seemed to be refuelling in a wadi not far to the left (south); he was only thankful that they did not intervene. Opposition was heavy enough as it was, and enemy infantry was 'now in full possession of Pt 175'; his losses were mounting, so Tomlinson's men 'went to ground about 300 yards from that point [the cairn] and managed to beat off an attack... with our own fire power.' This spirited action quietened the enemy and gave a breathing space during which the position was strengthened, a party of nineteen of A Company under Lieutenant Campbell and some stragglers of 25 Battalion were brought in on the right, and contact was eventually made with the 24th's D Company, which had by this time been 'pretty badly mauled'.**

**Thus the day drew to a close, and the fighting with it. Shuttleworth had decided to hold the ground now in his grasp, bringing up tools for the men to dig in and calling up his own A and B Companies later to form a reserve. Major Burton had reported to Shuttleworth and explained the situation as best he could. 'I could not give him a complete picture,' he says, '... as I had not seen all the left sector....' Burton was worried for the safety of Henderson's group of A Company, some 300 yards in front of the new positions, and also for any survivors there might be of Robertshaw's 15 Platoon. He dreaded a second mischance like that on**

**the right when men of 24 and 25 Battalions had fired at each other.**

**This final line was well short of the farthest reached by 25 Battalion and a long way short of its hopes. The wadi curling from south to west, which had served the enemy all afternoon as a hidden avenue of reinforcement for any part of the front, remained in his hands, though the New Zealand mortars and guns (unknown to their observers and crews, who had been firing blind) had dotted it with wounded and dead. The slopes from the cairn southwards where the first prisoners had been taken were back in enemy hands, and beyond them towards the west the ground held many wounded and dead of both sides. Somewhere between there and the escarpment Henderson was still holding out in a little island of some thirty A Company men. There was movement in the darkness and not all of it German. Lieutenant Ormond, for example, 'collected some of our wounded, Tom Gaddum, <sup>1</sup> Hugh Campbell, <sup>2</sup> S/Sgt Bill Marshall [who later died from exposure and the effects of his wounds] and a couple more. Had a yarn to them, got some Huns to find them blankets and was then marched off....' Two days later he escaped and was back with his unit. Miles Handyside, too, got back, after lying with other wounded under fire from Tomlinson's company. 'One man got hit again,' he says. 'At dusk a Hun showed us where our lines were and when it was darker told us to go back there, which**

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<sup>1</sup> L-Cpl F. J. Gaddum.

<sup>2</sup> L-Cpl H. McA. Campbell.

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**we did. The chap with me pulled himself along on his hands for 2 ½ hrs., as he had a broken leg. The 24th Bn wanted to take a shot at us but we talked them out of it.' Tomlinson adds: 'The area in which we had established ourselves was thickly strewn with 25 Bn wounded and much of the night was taken up with evacuating... wounded.'**

**On the right the line rested well short of the farthest advance of B**

Company of 25 Battalion, though how far II and 12 Platoons got before they turned back can only be guessed from accounts such as Bellerby's and Reed's. Bellerby, with Sanders and McNicol, had been lying still for about four hours—'Most of the time... the fire was too hot for us to move'. About 5 p.m. this fire had eased off and 'my mates assisted me back to the crest about 2-300 yards behind,' says Bellerby. From there an A Company truck, hastened by mortar fire, took the three wounded men back to the dressing station. Hoppe (and presumably Bray) was picked up about the same time by a Bren carrier sent up by 'three boys of my own platoon.' Simonsen of 15 Platoon, during a lull in the firing, heard someone calling. Taking a quick look on raised hands, I discerned a soldier some fifteen feet away, wounded. I wormed my way up to him, to find him in a very low condition. Basil Cook,<sup>1</sup> our section Bren gunner. I comforted him for a short time until he passed away. A fine soldier, his duty nobly done. I then borrowed a knife at his belt to cut off my boot.

Late at night Simonsen was picked up by a German ambulance car.<sup>2</sup> Reed stayed in action despite his wound, getting his arm dressed after dark, when D Company of 24 Battalion took over and what was left of B Company went into reserve. 'Keith Marshall and the boys came back,' he says, 'and told us they had 270 prisoners when they tallied up.'

Colonel Shuttleworth was indefatigable; he personally sited, often under fire, almost all the section posts on the right. It was far into the night before he allowed himself any rest from the duties which crowded upon him. Darkness eased his anxiety for the right flank, but the situation there was still somewhat tense, as Private Shakespear recalls it:

Towards dark the firing died down on both sides and we moved to flatter ground up on the escarpment. The Germans were fairly close, we could hear them giving orders and lining up their guns and vehicles on the flat below and a little way ahead. Flares were being used freely by the enemy. We just lay on bare ground, but dug in later as best we could. Pte Fleming,<sup>3</sup> a first war man, was a very great asset to our Coy...



D Company of the 24th had already lost 27 men, about a third of them killed. B Company of the 25th numbered only two officers (Wilson and Cathie) and 36 other ranks, a sad drop from the 120-odd at the start of the attack. Even 9 Platoon of **27 MG Battalion**, whose four Vickers guns had given valiant and valuable support to both flanks, had paid for its devotion in losses tragically heavy for such a small band. <sup>4</sup> The losses of the gallant C Squadron, **8 Royal Tanks**,

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<sup>1</sup> Pte B.J. Cooke.

<sup>2</sup> Such was the confusion of the night that it was a matter of luck whether the wounded here were picked up by friend or enemy and 8 other wounded of 15 Platoon, luckier than Simonsen, were brought back behind our lines. Simonsen was in Cpl Ussher's section, which had 5 killed, 3 wounded and safe (including Ussher), and 2 captured; all 10 of the section were hit. Out of 34 of 15 Platoon who went into action, 14 were killed, 9 wounded and safe, and 6 captured (of whom most if not all were wounded). This was a heavier rate of casualties even than 12 Platoon's, which had 9 killed; the section which included Reed had 4 killed or mortally wounded and 3 wounded out of 10.

<sup>3</sup> Pte D. Fleming.

<sup>4</sup> Its II killed and missing included the platoon commander, Lt T. W. Daly.

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are listed as 21 killed, wounded and missing, and no more than four runners were left out of the sixteen Valentines which had set out for Hill 175. <sup>1</sup> The stretch of desert above and below the escarpment and bounded on the west and south by the Rugbet en-Nbeidat now held some 120 dead or dying New Zealanders, at least that many dead Germans, and several hundreds of wounded of both sides. The wounded lay thick in places and were easily found, but elsewhere were thinly scattered in holes and little depressions wherein some were to lie for two or three

days yet, enduring the pain of their wounds, the pangs of thirst, and the cold at night until, for some of them, it was too late.

The darkness held other dangers too, as Privates R. T. K. Thomson of 25 Battalion mortar platoon found when he made his way back that night. He heard New Zealand voices and headed in their direction. Then a truck drove near and was loudly challenged to halt. It drove on and a Bren opened fire. The truck stopped and Thomson went over to it. He found Captain Roberts of A Company (who had been wounded that afternoon) lying on one side of it, his driver on the other. Roberts, dying, looked up at Thomson and said: 'Tough luck, being hit by your own chaps.'

For those who had survived the day's fighting and who now had to hold the ground won, there was not time yet for the shock of their various personal experiences of violence and bereavement to set in—that was not to develop for three or four days yet. In the meantime, as Burton says, 'There were at least 100 men of the Bn still on or about Pt 175 and they were hungry, sad, and damn cold.' Burton, the calm and competent ex-Territorial, had compassion and energy, and he got tea and a stew made and took these and greatcoats and blankets to his men at the front. 'So with a coat, a blanket and a stomach full of hot stew the troops soon lost that feeling of misery which the strain of battle, hunger and cold had brought on.' He was only sorry that he could not do the same for Henderson's group, not knowing where it was, but it was at least good to learn, as he did during the night, that it was still holding out. D Company of 24 Battalion was similarly cared for, as Private R. D. Lynn notes: 'Cpl Swanson <sup>2</sup> (OC's driver) had brought our greatcoats, and the evening meal at about 2200 hrs.'

If the dark brought relief to the men at the front, in the RAP at the wadi to the rear it meant little or nothing. 'Doc' McCarthy, 25 Battalion's Medical Officer, Padre Willis, medical orderlies and volunteer helpers and even a captured German doctor, as Private H. R. Mackenzie says, worked 'almost to the point of collapsing.' Mackenzie himself,

when free from his signals duties, 'helped dress various chaps with the result that my clothes from the knees downwards were very bloodstained and dirty.... I helped to spoon feed some of the poor chaps who could not move.' But grimness was not the only quality of the scene, as Private G. H. Logan of 24 Battalion's A Company reminds us:

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<sup>1</sup> Lt Ormond met one of the tank officers 'in the bag' and learned from him that he had 'disobeyed three orders to pull out' and was 'about to obey an emergency call' from his OC to withdraw at once when his tank was hit. His crew—and others—did not want to leave the infantry unsupported and dangerously exposed on their objective. Some tanks fell victim to 88-mm guns in the Blockhouse area; others, as we have seen, were knocked out by tanks and anti-tank guns on or below the escarpment. Eight enemy tanks were destroyed.

<sup>2</sup> Cpl W. T. Swanson.

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Just on dusk the prisoners (Germans) started to come in and our platoon was given 200 to look after....An order was given to take away the prisoners's boots—this was done and I accompanied the truckload of boots to Coy HQs where I was informed that the order had been countermanded and to return the boots to the prisoners. The 200 pairs were dumped in a pile and **Afrika Korps** officers and men searched for their own boots....

Next day, according to Private G. R. Mansel, 24 Battalion's B Company was given a task which has a familiar ring—'clearing up a few machine gun posts at Pt 175.' 'Our platoon, No. 10, hadn't gone many hundred yards,' he continues, 'when it became obvious we were in for a full scale attack.' But the task was accomplished at the cost of some thirty casualties and Hill 175 was ours. The huge enemy assembly to the south was taking its threat eastwards. To the west the Blockhouse invited attack, and beyond it the tomb of **Sidi Rezegh**.



*Valentine tanks moving up to support the New Zealanders*

***Valentine tanks moving up to support the New Zealanders***

GERMAN INFANTRY POSITIONS—*from photographs captured near Sidi Rezegh*



**GERMAN INFANTRY POSITIONS— *from photographs captured near Sidi Rezegh***

