

SUPPLY COMPANY

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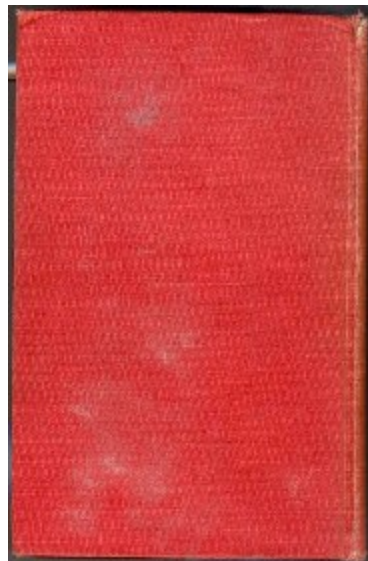
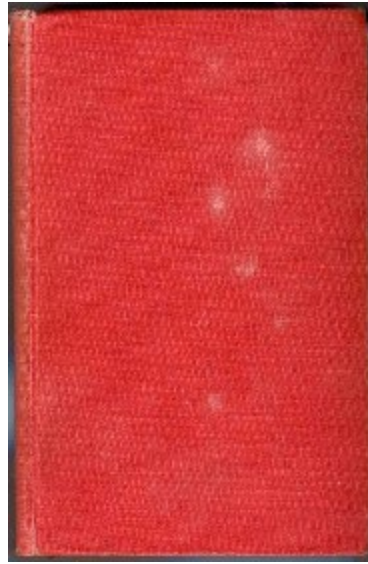
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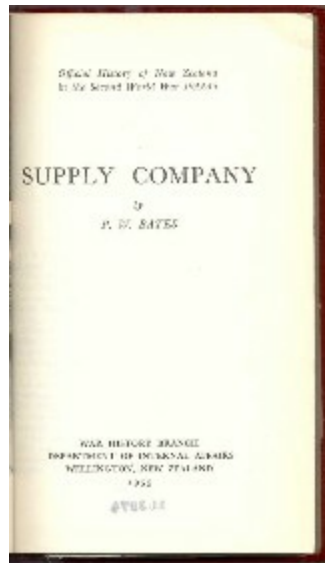


A supply point at the Hove Dump

A supply point at the Hove Dump

SUPPLY COMPANY

[TITLE PAGE]



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

SUPPLY COMPANY

P. W. BATES

WAR HISTORY BRANCH

**DEPARTMENT OF INTERNAL AFFAIRS WELLINGTON, NEW
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SUPPLY COMPANY

FOREWORD

Foreword



WINDSOR CASTLE

BY

IT is a pleasure and an honour for me to write this foreword to the history of this fine unit.

The Divisional Supply Company went overseas with the First Echelon of the New Zealand Expeditionary Force and was among the earliest of our units to see active service in the **Western Desert in General Wavell's 1940 campaign. In 1941 it served in the Greek campaign, where it lost its vehicles and all its equipment. When evacuated it fought as infantry in the Battle of **Crete** where it had heavy losses and fought with great distinction. It returned to Egypt where it was re-equipped and replacements found for its many casualties. It took a full part in the winter campaign in **Libya**. It then served in **Syria** and returned to the Desert for the great campaigns of 1942 and until the end in **Tunisia** in 1943. The Company continued to serve the Division in **Italy** until the end. In all it was more than six years on active service overseas.**

I feel that our greatest contribution to New Zealand's war effort was in the North African campaigns, in which high mobility and sound administration were essential and often decisive. New Zealanders were ideally suited for this class of warfare, which required initiative,

technical skill, and ability to find their way about the trackless Desert in the night, which they seemed to do by instinct.

The Divisional Supply Company was always an efficient and adaptable unit which served the Division well throughout its entire existence. Throughout the war the New Zealand Army Service Corps, of which it was a part, never failed us. I am certain that without their resourcefulness and skill we could not have attempted, let alone carried out, the long marches such as the turning movements at **Agheila and the **Mareth** line.**

This is a great story of the record of the service of one of the most efficient units of the 2nd New Zealand Division, which I hope will be widely read.

Bernard Fryberg

Deputy Constable and Lieutenant Governor

Windsor Castle

9

SEPTEMBER

1955

SUPPLY COMPANY

PREFACE

Preface

WHEN New Zealand's first troops were sent abroad, to serve in the South African War, the fleetest transport was the horse and the strongest the bullock—an unequal combination in mobile operations.

In World War I motor transport was primitive and the horse still predominant. When World War II came along the Army hadn't any experience to speak of in what might be called motorised warfare, yet somehow the New Zealand Division seemed to fall quite naturally into a life on wheels. Nowhere was this more clearly shown than in the Army Service Corps, of which Supply Company was a part.

World War II contained something of everything: precipitate flight, dogged defence, confused manœuvre, swift pursuit. There were static periods, mobile periods, and there were times when, as a supply group, Supply Company hardly existed at all. The way in which it met each change of circumstance provides the student of supply and transport with profitable lessons, and should give the general reader, too, an insight into what is entailed in keeping an army in the field supplied with food.

Supply Company's history has its moments of glory, but it is largely a story of devotion, of behind-the-scenes work that was an indispensable part of every operation the Division ever did. It brought the Company plenty of adventure and excitement, and its fair share of hard work.

A great many people have helped in the compilation of this history, and my thanks are due to them all, both former members of the unit and members of the staff of the **War History Branch**. But particularly I must thank Messrs R. E. Rawle, J. R. Morris and W. G. Quirk, without whose willing backing the Company's story could not have been so fully told.

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CHAPTER 1 – MOBILISATION AND DESPATCH TO EGYPT

CHAPTER 1

Mobilisation and Despatch to Egypt

DOWN from the Greek hills came a straggling, weary line of Australian infantrymen. One company was missing, and they were all more than twelve hours overdue at their rendezvous with the trucks that were to carry them back down the road of retreat. It was now late afternoon, and twenty-seven New Zealand three-tonners had been waiting since shortly before the previous midnight. As the khaki platoons assembled, there began a deep chorus of motor engines, and soon hot tins of meat and vegetables were handed out to the troops. The stoves were the exhaust manifolds of the trucks. Then the convoy went twisting along the road, while the sprawling men under the canopies nodded into semi-somnolence, their minds blanketed under fatigue and the rhythmic whirr-whirr of engine and transmission. For them this was a pause between one losing battle and the next, a few miles gained towards escape from indefinite captivity.

It was still a young war on this April day in 1941, a time when the greatest virtue was valour in defeat. The battles then being fought would be recorded with pride, but shadowed in the memory by the towering victories of later years. Yet here, in defeat, those victories were born. Here, less than a year since these men had been scattered civilians in a thousand different jobs, they were knitted together in a joint enterprise against overwhelming forces. Here, without favour or prejudice, the clear mirror of adversity reflected their qualities and disclosed the nature of the battles to come—hard battles, made so by the spirit shown in **Greece**.

All this was clear enough from the fighting man's point of view. Fighting is the business of war, and it is in these terms that people think. But fighting is sustained only by a myriad of minor, unsung, often half-forgotten tasks; by such things as twenty-seven trucks waiting patiently for missing troops; by a hot meal, welcome and unexpected, thrust into the hands of the dog-tired soldier; by steady,

skilful driving into the dusk along a strange road. That is the story of this history. Not precisely these things, because although these were trucks of 2 New Zealand Divisional Supply Column (later renamed 1 Supply Company), it was not the duty of the Column to carry troops or, directly, to feed them. But as part of the **Army Service Corps**, its duty was service, and service is a liberal word. This is a story of service.

Throughout the war Supply Column's job was to assemble food, carry it and issue it—just that. A simple task to define, more complex to put into practice. In terms of people, a division represents a fair-sized town—15,000 men or more. To these men for the greater part of six years, 365 days of each year, the Column brought three meals a day; they brought it across deserts, over mountains, through enemy fire, past prowling tanks. They brought it, and then in business-like manner set up shop and apportioned it out to the quartermasters, whatever the weather or the closeness of the enemy. This was their job, and like any soldier's job it took no account of difficulties and dangers. It was there to be done; it was done. If the Column stopped at all, it was to fight or to shoulder another task.

For this work they were known, with the soldier's irreverence, as 'jam jugglers', and for the early part of their life in the army there may have been a lurking suspicion that wizardry of some sort was going to be needed if their unit was ever to operate in the field. When Supply Column came into being at **Burnham** in October 1939 there was not even a skeleton to clothe: there was one permanent staff instructor, little transport to speak of, even less idea at first of what was expected of the unit, and certainly none of how it was really going to perform its task when it finally caught up with the war.

For that matter, it was not known in the beginning whether the unit would ever catch up with the war, because when the first volunteers of the **2 NZEF** were mobilised on 3 October 1939 they were drafted into what was known as the **Special Force**, which had no specifically designated purpose, or none that was disclosed. Feeling its way through this haze of uncertainty, Supply Column gathered knowledge as it went

along, and when it emerged into a clearer light found itself charged with the task of victualling the Division, or at any rate the First Echelon. Its guiding principle was: 'The troops must be fed.' It was, in effect, the last link in the supply chain to the forward troops, and as such it was one of the services that in part governed the mobility of the Division.



Though Supply Column was formed in October, a month after the outbreak of war with **Germany**, it came into being officially in November, with the issue that month of a provisional war establishment. On 8 December this provisional establishment was superseded by a new one providing for 280 officers and other ranks, plus four attached other ranks. It was split into headquarters, two echelons and a workshops section. Headquarters, which included supply details and tradesmen, had a strength of 38; Nos. 1 and 2 Echelons, each with a strength of 107, consisted of echelon headquarters, with supply details, and two sections, which in their turn were divided into sub-sections; Workshops Section, or J Section, was divided into section headquarters and a subsection. In theory, each echelon would carry one day's rations to the Division on alternate days, drawing from a railhead or a depot and distributing to units at a supply point. It was the task of Workshops Section to keep the vehicles on the road.

This strength, of course, was only for the First Echelon, as the **Special Force** became, and Supply Column was added to as the Second and Third Echelons were sent overseas. Later, when its name was

changed, its composition was also revised.

So, as the Army drew up establishments and converted them into intricate tables of strengths of men, weapons and vehicles, Supply Column took form and began to scrape about for its knowledge. Staff-Sergeant Pullen ¹ was the sole Regular Force instructor, and in their technical training the men were led through training manuals by instructors who kept one jump ahead of their pupils. Although the unit's operations were based on motor transport, there were in the camp only ten training vehicles, of which two were artillery tractors. These few trucks were shared with 4 Reserve Mechanical Transport Company, and until impressed vehicles improved the situation, technical training was confined mainly to lectures at which instructors were bombarded with questions, and not infrequently, to the satisfaction of the questioners, had to refer to the manual for the answers.

There was, of course, ordinary soldiering to be done as well. The Army Service Corps must be able to fight, and with the other units suffered gas lectures, tedious drill and weapon training, map reading and compass instruction, and all such things that to the soldier's regret go into his making.

Burnham in those days offered few of the off-duty comforts that later drafts enjoyed, and the ASC—'still very much the Cinderella of the Division', remarks Staff-Sergeant Pullen—was living in bell tents while most of the camp enjoyed the comparative luxury of hutments. But there were some comforts. The YMCA and Church Army provided their cups of tea; concert parties visited the camp; and eventually there was a bar, at the opening of which a clamorous mob, led by a piper, marched past the orderly room and the parade ground.

In all fairness it should be acknowledged that this was something more than just alcoholic exuberance, for there was among these first volunteers a natural buoyancy of spirit which often found its outlet in boisterous conviviality. This, for instance, is a mess parade, described by Sergeant Conway: ²

Late comers held up the queue, and those first in line would heap abuse on their heads. Although a reasonable amount of decorum was required in the mess rooms, no person within half a mile could possibly mistake the arrival of dixies from the kitchen, for this event coincided with the lusty singing of 'He Careth for Me'.

An influenza epidemic, colloquially known as the ' **Burnham** bot', knocked some of the exuberance out of the troops in November, and for about a week the active strength of the ASC was reduced from about 550 to 200.

These were the beginnings. With these limitations and interruptions, training went ahead with nothing more definite in view than a possibility that the men when trained might be dismissed to their occupations on indefinite leave without pay. Doubt was resolved on 23 November, however, with an announcement by the Prime Minister, Mr Savage, that the **Special Force** would be sent overseas.

Training, for so long like a futile game of war, assumed a new significance, and though still hampered by the shortcomings of equipment, was carried out with more purpose. There was range practice at Redcliffs, an expedition that gave the motor-cyclists, at least, an inner glow of satisfaction by allowing them to deploy ahead of the convoy and hold up traffic at a busy Colombo Street intersection in **Christchurch**; there were unditching exercises with the diminutive fleet of transport, carried out in a state of high tension under the critical eye of the Commander NZASC, LieutenantColonel **Crump**; ³ and, more fondly remembered, there was a night manoeuvre that ended, happily, near a country hotel, where impecunious drivers made good use of officers' higher rates of pay.

Training came to an end. The Advance Party of the Division sailed from **Wellington** on the *Awatea* on 11 December. With it, after three days' special leave, went Captain I. E. **Stock** ⁴ (not to be confused with the OC, Captain E. J. **Stock** ⁵), Staff-Sergeant **Polson**, ⁶ Sergeant **Boanas**, ⁷ and Drivers MacShane ⁸ and **Hinchey** ⁹ of Supply Column. The party

disembarked at **Port Said** on 7 January 1940.

Meanwhile arrangements at **Burnham** for the embarkation of the main body were marked by the legendary clerical error through which, cynics hold, so many gain promotion. The victim was Captain E. J. Stock, who celebrated his promotion to major only to find in the morning that it was a mistake.

Those still in New Zealand went on fourteen days' special leave on 11 December, enabling them to spend Christmas at home—for many of them the last for at least four years. 'Home for Christmas' was to be a phrase that was to echo through the years. But in those heady days, when calamitous failures and bitter struggles lay unseen in the future, no one was thinking a great deal about coming home.

On the men's return to camp final preparations were made, and there was a farewell parade through **Christchurch**. The Column embarked at **Lyttelton** on 5 January 1940 with other units on the Polish ship *Sobieski*. The unit consisted now of nine officers, fifteen warrant officers and sergeants, and 265 other ranks. The Lyttelton group, *Sobieski* and *Dunera*, with HMS *Leander* as escort, sailed at 4.30 p.m. Cheering followed the ships as they drew away. 'The people of New Zealand were eager to see their troops going to the help of Great Britain,' was how it seemed to a Polish doctor on the *Sobieski*.

The following morning they joined the transports *Orion*, *Strathaird*, *Empress of Canada* and *Rangitata* outside **Wellington**. The convoy converged into formation, and under the escort of HM Ships *Ramillies*, *Leander* and *Canberra*, steamed westwards three abreast: *Strathaird*, *Orion* and *Rangitata* followed by *Sobieski*, *Empress of Canada* and *Dunera*. The three warships were ahead, *Ramillies* in the centre, and the other two on the flanks and a little further advanced. Low-flying aircraft dipped their wings in salute. At 6 p.m. those still watching New Zealand dwindle away between the blue sky and the bluer sea saw the last vestige of their country—the peak of Mount Egmont—go from view.

In impressive array, the convoy carved through the Tasman towards **Australia**. The men settled in—not very difficult in those early days when ships were still equipped for peace and most men had cabins. The cabins, in fact, had been the centre of a great deal of SYSTEMity before the ships left New Zealand. Only the poor old *Dunera*, which had been a trooper in the **India** service, was without luxury. She had little to commend her to soldier or mariner. Plodding along in the rear, she managed to keep station during the day, but at night invariably fell behind and at dawn would be some distance astern. The whole convoy would have to slow down to allow her to regain her position.

A spell of rough weather gave stomachs a fair test, but the convoy approached **Australia** across a glossy sea. On the 10th an RAAF Avro Anson droned overhead. Off the southern tip of **Australia** the convoy was joined first by four transports with Australian troops, *Orcades*, *Orontes*, *Orford* and *Strathnaver*, and later by a fifth, the *Empress of Britain*. Two more warships, HMAS *Adelaide* and *Australia*, came with them, and in three rows of three abreast, with *Orford* and *Empress of Britain* pairing off astern, the convoy passed through **Bass Strait** and into the storms of the **Great Australian Bight**.

The ships reached **Fremantle** on 18 January, and there was a brief pause and a chance to look over **Perth**. The convoy put out again on the 20th and plodded north towards the scorching heat of the **Indian Ocean**. Heat and limited space curbed any ambitious training, but if one observer is to be believed the daily physical drill, signalling and lectures were attended and performed with incredible enthusiasm.

‘It please me to see the soldiers doing their physical exercises and executing their orders cheerfully,’ the same Polish doctor wrote in the ship's magazine, *The Transport Z6*. ‘It is clear they carry out their duty as an order from their King.’

The doctor remarked on the ‘sympathy of the officers for the men, showing care for their well-being,’ and on the ‘great respect of soldiers for officers.’ This, he said, agreed with his mental picture of the English

Army and the English people.

The Transport Z6 was a weekly, edited by Captain **McIndoe**,¹⁰ of Supply Column.

The convoy split while approaching Colombo, and the second half, which included the *Sobieski*, passed through the breakwaters on 30 January. There was leave on both days of the two-day stay, and a cricket match was played with a university team.

Nine days out from Colombo the convoy broke up before entering the Gulf of **Suez**. On 12 February a slender wedge of land became visible ahead to those on the *Sobieski*. It resolved itself into a crumbling escarpment, lying like a great wedge-shaped cheese tapering away to the south-east. At the north-western end it ended abruptly in a sheer bluff, at the foot of which was a long sweep of sand on which sat **Tewfik**.

At 9 a.m. the ship dropped anchor outside the breakwater. Across the water lay the jumbled town, and flanking it dunes of sand—a yellow-brown that became a most familiar colour over the next few years.

At 10.30 a.m. the British Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs, Mr Anthony Eden, accompanied by **Major-General Freyberg**, came aboard. Three-quarters of an hour later the *Sobieski* picked up her anchor and was towed in to the wharf near the *Dunera*.

With sleepy reluctance, the troops turned out next morning at half past four, breakfasted at five, and set about cleaning up the ship. At 8.15 a.m. the ship began to disgorge troops, and the train standing at the station to absorb them. Two hours later Supply Column men were watching the changing scene of a new country: streets, shops and houses of a foreign style but all passing too quickly to be seen closely; clay hovels, clustered together in primitive villages; flat infertile fields; and miles of sand.

And at last to **Maadi** Camp, near the rim of the Nile Valley, just beyond where the flourishing green of the **Maadi** township ends and the

coarse yellow desert begins. The land rises here in massive undulations to where a towering escarpment, gashed and scarred by time and weather, walls off the spreading miles of arid country beyond. Here at the beginning of 1940 the First Echelon of **2 NZEF** made its camp—a camp that was to be ‘home’ for the Division through the crucial years ahead.

¹ **Capt A. A. Pullen; Burnham; born Calcutta, 13 Jul 1907; Regular soldier.**

² **WO II H. H. Conway; born 8 May 1899; mechanic and fitter.**

³ **Brig S. H. Crump, CBE, DSO, m.i.d., Bronze Star (US); Lower Hutt; born Wellington, 25 Jan 1889; Regular soldier; NZASC 1915–19; Commander NZASC, 2 NZ Div, 1940–45; commanded 2 NZEF (Japan) Jun-Sep 1947; on staff HQ BCOF and NZ representative on Disposals Board in Japan, 1948–49.**

⁴ **Maj I. E. Stock, MBE, ED, m.i.d.; Christchurch; born Christchurch, 24 May 1914; clerk; OC 4 Res MT Coy 26 Jun 1941–12 Sep 1943; OC Sup Coln 12 Nov 1940–5 Mar 1941; OC NZ Admn Gp Oct 1942–Sep 1943; OC NZ VRD, Bari, Sep–Dec 1943.**

⁵ **Maj E. J. Stock; Christchurch; born Ashburton, 19 Jan 1907; salesman; OC Sup Coln 3 Oct 1939–22 Sep 1940, 7–12 Nov 1940; wounded 22 Sep 1940.**

⁶ **S-Sgt L. A. Polson; Christchurch; born Christchurch, 29 Oct 1911; clerk; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.**

⁷ **WO II G. S. Boanas, EM; Christchurch; born Runanga, 13 Aug 1914; newspaper-runner supervisor.**

⁸ **2 Lt A. N. MacShane; born NZ, 24 Jul 1915; storeman timekeeper; killed in action 5 Nov 1942.**

⁹ **Cpl L. W. Hinchey; Invercargill; born NZ, 19 Jan 1914; diesel tractor expert; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.**

¹⁰ **Capt J. L. McIndoe, m.i.d.; Dunedin; born Dunedin, 18 Nov 1898; printer; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.**

SUPPLY COMPANY

CHAPTER 2 – WAVELL'S CAMPAIGN

CHAPTER 2

Wavell's Campaign

EGYPT in February 1940 was a long way from any theatre of operations. But Hitler's Axis partner, Mussolini, had troops in Cyrenaica and a dependable barrier was needed to protect the Suez Canal. Although there was no immediate enemy, there was serious purpose behind the New Zealanders' training and equipping.

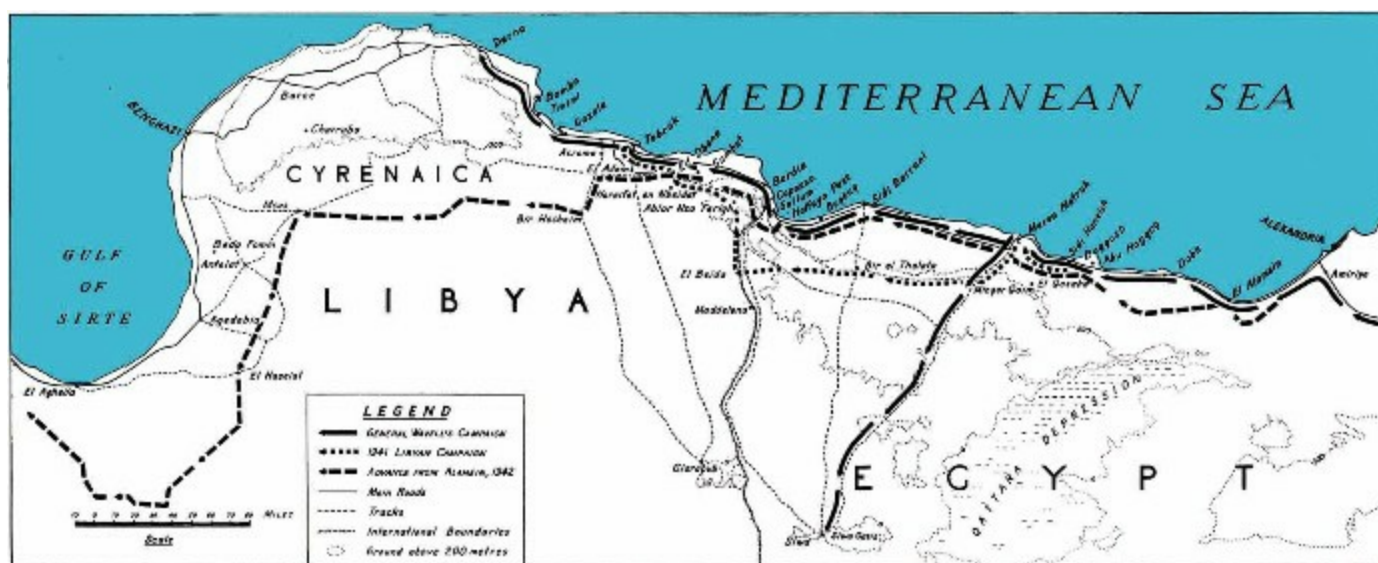
The first consignment of trucks and motor cycles—on loan from the RASC—was issued to Supply Column the day after its arrival at Maadi, and the men settled down to accustom themselves to their tented camp on the fringe of the desert. In those early days the few huts were cookhouses, messrooms and canteens.

Training, which commenced in earnest on 19 February, included to the general dismay of the long-suffering men a continuation of parade-ground drill, with the added complication of keeping a rifle clean in a country where fine dust would parcel it up as it stood overnight in the tent.

One of the earliest tasks was the 'peaceful penetration' of an RASC depot. Early training in New Zealand had given members of supply details only a book knowledge of their work and they had contemplated with some trepidation the prospect of establishing a base supply depot for 4 Brigade. Their relief was profound when they found they were to take over an established depot. For two months RASC clerks, issuers and storemen worked beside the New Zealanders until, with some modification of system, things were working smoothly.

To all intents and purposes the depot worked almost on a civilian basis, but of course the issue of goods did not entail cash transactions. The accounting system was involved and its mastery took far longer than the manual task of handling and issuing large quantities of foodstuffs. Tinned foods formed the bulk of early issues, but fresh food, which saved shipping space and was better for the troops' health, was

used in larger quantities as contracts came into operation. Local contracts for fresh vegetables, fruit and eggs were drawn up and approved when the depot commenced operations under Second-Lieutenant **Quirk**.¹ On the accounting side these contracts operated admirably, and all accounts submitted to the financial adviser and auditor were returned without a single observation or qualification.



In achieving fulfilment of contracts, however, the New Zealanders quickly learned that in Egyptian business all is fair that is not detected. Stones in the bottom of sacks and crates, and good quality goods stacked on top of those of inferior quality were among the tricks practised, and it took limitless patience to impress on the vendors that Tuesday was not a substitute for Monday, that lettuces would not do in place of cabbages, and that a specified weight was not something a little less.

One stratagem was far from original but highly successful for a while. A donkey train invariably delivered fresh, crisp spinach and was rewarded with unstinted praise. Soon, however, substantial and repeated discrepancies were noted between the amount received and that issued to units. An investigation disclosed that on approaching the depot the vendor halted his donkeys while he drenched his spinach in a nearby well, which incidentally had been condemned as impure. The absorbed water weighed to the vendor's advantage, but dried out by the time the spinach was issued.

This side of the Column's operations, covered by the general term 'supply', was of course the chief reason for the unit's existence, but far from covered its entire responsibility, for as a more or less self-contained unit its work fell into two distinct sections: supply and transport. During these early days the work was mainly static, but in the mobile warfare that lay ahead success depended as much on getting the food where it was wanted as on the unit's ability to apportion it out.

So while supply details were settling into depot duties, drivers were mastering the ways of desert transportation and NCOs the intricacies of desert navigation with prismatic and sun compasses. On hard, stony ground it was all straight going, but in the soft sand the two-wheel-drive Morris and Bedford trucks bedded down comfortably and moved on with great reluctance. A high standard of driving was quickly attained, however.

New trucks were arriving, and at intervals during March, April and May men were sent to [Port Said](#) and [Alexandria](#) to drive them back to a vehicle reception depot at [Abbassia](#), where they were equipped with tools, wheel chains, sand mats and trays. Spare tires, which were to be so desperately needed in the desert, were supplied when available. At this time there was one to every ten trucks.

One drive from [Alexandria](#) to [Abbassia](#) was memorable. The convoy battled through a violent sandstorm and arrived at the reception depot with most of the paint sand-blasted off one side of the vehicles.

Thus training and equipping went on. Courses in motor transport and supply duties were held at [Moascar](#), on the Canal, and at [Abbassia](#) mechanics were given trade tests. During April drivers took part in a three-day exercise held by [4 Brigade](#) at [El Saff](#).

Gradually a complete establishment of vehicles, including those for the anticipated Second Echelon, was accumulated. As vehicles were received—mainly Bedford 15-cwts and three-ton models, with a sprinkling of Fordson 15-cwts, Humber staff cars, Austin 8s and motor

cycles—they were checked and serviced by Workshops Section.

Concurrent with this attainment of preparedness, world events were moving to a climax. During May the German forces were sweeping the Allies back across France. Then, on 10 June, when France was beaten and Britain apparently on the brink of defeat, Italy entered the war.

The peaceful aspect of the New Zealanders' life in Egypt disappeared. On the day Italy declared war Supply Column dispersed its vehicles over a previously arranged area, and next day it dug slit trenches. On the 12th two 30-cwt trucks were despatched with loads of high explosive for 2 Squadron, Royal Engineers, thought to be at Garawla, south-east of Mersa Matruh. The squadron had moved, however, and the trucks went on to Buq Buq, returning to Maadi on the 15th after covering 950 miles in an almost continuous run. This was the start. During June, July and August 4 Brigade was engaged in digging second-line defences at Garawla, and Supply Column shuttled battalions to and from the Western Desert. On 20 July vehicles were sent to a secret destination under cover of darkness: to establish a dump south of El Alamein—an obscure little place of no apparent significance.

The Column's first fully active part in the preparation to defend Egypt was to send a detachment of ninety-six other ranks to Mersa Matruh to relieve A Section, 4 RMT Company, which had been there for over two months. The detachment left Maadi on 14 August and on arrival immediately began convoy duties to Sidi Barrani.

It was a very quiet war, still. The front was silent, and the Italian Air Force never worried the Supply Column detachment. Savoias passed overhead to bomb Mersa Matruh, however, and once—on 23 August—a convoy on its way to Sidi Barrani saw fighters attacking a British tank.

The detachment's work was normal second and third-line transport duties that took it west to Sidi Barrani and east to Baggush. Supplies were carried for English, Indian, Palestinian, Cypriot and Egyptian troops, and occasionally reinforcements were taken up to the line and

leave parties brought back to **Matruh**.

The detachment's only casualty during this time came not from enemy action but from a collision. On 23 August the detachment commander, Captain **Taylor**,² Second-Lieutenant **Hastie**,³ and the adjutant of 4 RMT Company (Lieutenant **Butterfield**⁴), were returning from an Egyptian Army mess where they had been guests, when there was an almost head-on collision with an Egyptian load-carrier. Taylor received serious injuries necessitating his discharge from the Army as unfit.

There was a sequel to this accident. Early the following morning the wrecked car was found by Supply Column men returning from **Sidi Barrani**, and in time-honoured army fashion it was 'ratted' of battery, tools and upholstered seats. Unfortunately the seats were recognised the same day by Lieutenant Butterfield—whose only comment was, 'Making it a bit thick, aren't you?'—and as the staff car driver was being court-martialled all articles had to be returned.

Back at **Maadi**, meanwhile, preparations were under way for a move to **Daba**, and on 4 September the **Mersa Matruh** detachment returned to the unit. Two days later an ASC reorganisation was effected. For operations in the Western Desert Supply Column was reduced to eight officers and 170 other ranks. The remaining three officers and 109 other ranks were amalgamated with one officer and twenty-seven other ranks of **Petrol Company** to form a composite ASC unit for base duties. The next day what was left of the Column moved out for **Daba**.

Supply Column at last was beginning to catch up with the war; obligingly the war came to meet it half-way. Four days after the Column reached the Western Desert Marshal Graziani's forces invaded **Egypt**.

The Italian forces, numerically far stronger than General Wavell's small army, came across the border on 13 September, three months after the Italian declaration of war, and as the British forces drew back penetrated into **Egypt**. At **Sidi Barrani** Graziani halted and began to dig

in, and the situation in the **Western Desert** again became static. The enemy's intention was assumed to be a drive on the **Suez Canal**, but except for a tensely watched reconnaissance in force that moved forward 15 miles, no major move was made by the invader.

For the next three months, while General Wavell planned his counter-stroke, light British forces made sorties deep into Italian-held territory and harassed enemy positions.

The main body of Supply Column, consisting of eight officers and 170 other ranks, left **Maadi** on 7 September in a convoy of sixty-four trucks and thirty-four motor cycles. The yellow trucks rolled west along the desert road, reaching **Daba** the next day, and in typical desert style the unit went to earth near the coast. Abu Haggag became supply railhead on 20 September when the Column, with headquarters still at **Daba**, set up a DID (detail issue depot) there and from it supplied **4 Brigade**, in a second-line defensive position at **Baggush**, and nearby British units.

The Column's first assignment of importance after its arrival in the desert was to transport 6000 gallons of petrol and 360 gallons of oil to **Siwa**, where 1 King's Royal Rifles was stationed. This was a modest enough task by later standards, but as one of the Column's earliest long cross-country runs under the security conditions of a war zone, it was of some significance in the moulding of the unit's competence. It contained a lesson no future transport officers should ignore. Supply Column learned it at the cost of its first casualty from enemy action.

Secrecy in these days was carried to the extreme of leaving the convoy drivers in ignorance of their destination—a sound enough general principle in theory. But in practice this is what happened.

There were fifteen vehicles in the convoy when it moved off on the morning of 22 September under the OC, Major E. J. Stock. The intention was to bypass **Matruh**, but at the gap in the fortress perimeter the convoy became entangled with an RASC convoy also heading westwards.

When the confusion was cleared, Stock found he had only three trucks. The rest had gone on to **Matruh** and, though they weren't to know it, to their baptism of fire.

Stock despatched the three trucks through the eastern defences and, leaving Sergeant-Major Pullen to direct any further vehicles that might come through, went in pursuit of the rest of his convoy. He had just found and assembled the wayward trucks when fifty Italian aircraft droned overhead, very high. At a nearby railway crossing a train chuffed by while motor trucks waited for it to pass. It was the type of cluster airmen dream of, and the bombs came whistling down. From the safety of their high altitude, the Italian bombardiers were erratic in their aim, but there was an uncomfortable few minutes while the bombs erupted into billows of smoke and dust. When it was all over one Supply Column truck was out of commission and Stock wounded. A nearby RASC 15-cwt was blown up and its three occupants killed.

Major Stock was taken to hospital, and the command of the convoy passed to Second-Lieutenant **Dill**,⁵ of **19 Battalion**, who was in charge of an escort detachment detailed to protect the convoy from any hostile bedouin. Dill took the trucks to the **Siwa Track**, where they were joined before dark by the other three. The complete convoy moved south and laagered for the night under the escarpment fringing the **Siwa Track**, and continued southwards in the morning. The convoy reached the oasis of **Siwa** after passing through a deep ravine, and saw in the last glow of sunlight a vista of two still lakes rimmed by thousands of date palms and olive, pomegranate and fig trees.

Captain **Davis**⁶ and Sergeant-Major Pullen, who had left **Baggush** at eleven o'clock that morning, arrived in time to see the load delivered. The next afternoon, after a pleasant swim in Cleopatra's Pool, the convoy set out on the return journey. **Daba** was reached the following day (25 September).

Captain I. E. Stock assumed temporary command of the unit on 12 November.

For the next two months the Column was mainly engaged in third-line transport work, involving clearance of supplies, petrol and ammunition in addition to daily replenishment of its depot at Abu Haggag. There was little variation; on one occasion bombs were taken forward for the Desert Air Force. The road to **Mersa Matruh was often congested, and frequently trucks had to use rough desert tracks.**

The imminent British attack was a close secret, but in the movements of the Column early in December the shape of things to come could be seen. On 4 December the Column shifted headquarters to **Qasaba to take up transport duties in forward areas, and next day it transported ammunition from **Qasaba** siding to dumps in the desert. On the 6th the unit began general transport work from various railway depots to field service depots (FSDs) west of **Matruh**.**

Three days later the British attack burst over the idle Italians. **Sidi Barrani was in British hands on the 10th, and the pursuit was on—to **Buq Buq, Halfaya, Sollum** and **Fort Capuzzo**. In a week **Egypt** was clear of the enemy. Italians scooped into the bag totalled 40,000; British casualties were fewer than 1000, and these were mainly wounded.**

The major part of the New Zealand forces 'sat out' this operation, but the three NZASC units—Supply Column and Petrol and Ammunition Companies—were drawn in to act as general carriers. Transport was one of the keys to this victory. This was the British Army's first experience of a blitzkrieg—in the right direction—and the swift thrusts put a considerable strain on lines of communication.

Through dust and rain and over atrocious roads and desert tracks, these three New Zealand units, generally known as 'The Colonial Carrying Company', kept their sorely tested trucks moving with supplies and earned for themselves a reputation for reliability, willingness and efficiency. How well the job was done is vouched for by the fact that never at any time was there a shortage of essential supplies in Wavell's forces, and though the sole credit for this is far from being theirs, the New Zealanders received special praise from General O'Connor, GOC

Western Desert Force.

By 18 December advanced mechanised units were firing on Bardia, but the capture of this strongly fortified position required careful planning and preparation, and no assault was attempted that month.

Behind the army came the supplies, and each step forward brought new problems for the Colonial Carrying Company. On 15 December, six days after the first assault, the field depots were already on the move and had to be found in their new locations. Three Supply Column trucks under Sergeant-Major Pullen had to find 5 FSD on this day without aid of map or compass, and with very little help from men met en route.

Though it might not have occurred to anyone at the time, a new era was opening for Supply Column. The desert, dusty, rough and above all vast, lay before it, a strange desert now, but soon to become familiar.

It was also a new era for drivers—a comfortless era. A Supply Column convoy bouncing across the desert in search of the new location of 6 Ammunition Depot, for which it had two-pounder shells and .303 ammunition, broke front main springs in two 30-cwt trucks and had three blow-outs in rear tires. The convoy commander came home to report: ‘The desert travelling was very rough, and the road Sidi Barrani-Mersa Matruh is in very poor order.’

Except when compelled, trucks rarely went far from the one road, partly because of thermos bombs, ⁷ thoughtfully left by the Italians, and partly because the rough going made time-saving short-cuts costly in wear and tear. But the road itself was no smooth highway. In places the bitumen was completely gone, and it was rutted and dusty. Broken springs and burst tires became daily incidentals of convoy work, and to keep trucks moving was as often a test of improvisation as of driving skill. Spring steel was like gold and tires were almost as rare, and to abandon a broken-down truck was to surrender it forever; by next day it would be found stripped to the chassis.

Even worse than the break-downs was the dust. There was always

dust on the road, curling up from the bouncing wheels and closing around the driving cab in fine, choking clouds as the day-long stream of vehicles, following in the same tracks, roared and whined through a yellow pall of their own making. When the khamsin blew—usually for several days on end—the dust became an impenetrable blanket over the whole desert, reddening the eyes, clogging the throat and laying over everything a smooth, yellow coat.

This was the sort of country in which Christmas 1940—the first away from home—was spent. But it wasn't a dull Christmas. The Column gathered at **Qasaba**, and with the aid of turkey, green peas, cabbage, baked potatoes, plum duff and a bottle of beer plus ten cigarettes and ten piastres a man, whipped up a fine festive spirit. Driver **Deaker**⁸ was even forgiven for drinking the brandy intended for the plum pudding.

While his advanced forces stood outside **Bardia**, General Wavell brought up the reserves that the first easy successes had left intact, and over the closing days of December Supply Column convoys, supplemented by trucks from Petrol and Ammunition Companies, moved **2/7 Australian Battalion** forward to a position beyond **Halfaya**. Although unmolested by the enemy—the Italian Air Force had withdrawn to bases further back and was giving even forward troops little to worry about—these trips were not without their incidents, and rough going, unfamiliar terrain, darkness, and on one occasion the haste of a guide were complicating factors that brought convoys to their destinations short by half a dozen or so vehicles. To relieve the strain on the Bedfords, Italian diesels were pressed into service.

General Wavell began 1941 with a bombardment of **Bardia** on New Year's Day as a prelude to an attack on the 3rd. **Bardia** fell on the 5th, and the pursuit was on again. At **Tobruk** there was another pause while ammunition and supplies were brought forward.

The capture of **Sollum** had enabled supplies during this build-up period to be shipped through that port, and Supply Column was left in a backwater. It carried mixed loads: rations, petrol, bombs, clothing and

ordnance stores. Backloads were invariably Italian prisoners, who, though an encumbrance to the fighting units, were at least useful to drivers. It was a common sight to see Italians changing wheels, fitting new springs, and generally being made to work their passage. Few convoy reports fail to mention delays through poor road surface, broken springs or tire trouble. Though it was winter, dust was still a hindrance, too. Four three-tonners that went to **Baggush** aerodrome on 16 January to transfer 202 Group RAF to **Sollum** met a pall of dust that suspended work and held back the convoy until the next day.

And there were other things beside the elements and the road. A picture of what could happen in the desert on a seemingly simple assignment is provided by the travels of a Supply Column three-tonner that went forward to an ordnance depot at **Sollum** with two howitzer barrels and a scammel tire. The truck cleared the ordnance depot at **Matruh** at 11.45 a.m. on 17 January. A blow-out, a broken spring and a dust-storm extended the journey to **Sollum** into the next day. At **Sollum** depot there was no way of unloading the howitzer barrels. Delayed still by the sandstorm, it took Driver **McDonald**⁹ a day's touring to find someone who could relieve him of the tire and a second day to get rid of the howitzer barrels. But he was still a long way from home. **Tobruk** was falling, and the army was on the move again, and McDonald had trouble finding someone who had the time to pause and supply him with petrol. With a load of salvage, he returned to **Matruh** after a five-day round trip.

Attacked on 21 January, **Tobruk** was captured the following day, and the British forces moved on towards **Gazala**, thence to **Derna**. Still away back at **Baggush**, Western Desert Force Headquarters decided it was time to move, and it was Supply Column, with supplementary trucks from a **Petrol Company** detachment, that transported it. Force Headquarters moved forward into **Libya** on 24 January, with **Gambut** as its intended new location. But this was apparently too timid a move to match the high optimism of the army. When the convoy arrived it was found that Headquarters was to move to **Bomba**, beyond **Gazala** and only 40 miles from **Derna**. **Gazala** had fallen into British hands only the previous day

(the 24th), and British forces were still outside **Derna**, where the Italians put up a strong defence. **Bomba** was reached on the 26th, two days before the opening of the attack on **Derna**.

On the spot when an urgent appeal for petrol was received from the RAAF next day, the New Zealand trucks were sent back to **Gazala** to pick up supplies and take them forward. That night was spent at **Tobruk** in drenching rain. Sodden blankets and a broken-down truck didn't provide the best of starts, and the convoy, now laden with prisoners, was late in moving off for the return trip to **Egypt**. After dropping their cargo at **Matruh**, the trucks reached camp on 29 January.

Derna fell after three days' fighting, and as the Australians pushed towards **Benghazi**, General Wavell swung an armoured 'left hook' around to Beda Fomm, 60 miles south of **Benghazi**, and on 5 February intercepted a very surprised enemy. After a lively thirty-six hours the desert looked like a fowlhouse after a terrier has been loose inside. **El Agheila**, the limit of the advance, was reached next day, and the campaign, **Britain's** first decisive victory of the war, was over. Wavell's 31,000 men had pushed back something like 180,000 Italians and had taken 133,289 prisoners.

The end of the campaign did not end Supply Column's work. Cold, rain and an occasional flooded road now added to the general discomforts. Battle dress was still unheard of in this part of the world, and Supply Column men were in summer dress. 'We were damned cold,' remarks Major Stock with some feeling. The obvious remedy was the acquisition of warmer Italian clothing that had fallen into British hands, and at times the New Zealander's only identification was his grin and his unmistakable vernacular.

The unit was now operating as far as **Derna**. Although road improvements were being made—a convoy report dated 10 February records with a note of incredulity, ' **Sidi Barrani** road is now in lot better condition. Unbroken tar sealing extends to Kilo 61.'—the lift from **Qasaba** to **Derna** was considered quite a feat. In some places the road

had been heavily mined and when blown was reduced to a rough track for scores of miles. Two convoys went as far as **Derna**.

The second was the unit's last in this phase of operations. While it was still in **Libya**, the rest of the unit packed up at **Qasaba** and on 20 February set off for **Maadi**. When its vehicles rolled into the camp next day, their occupants, after five months in the **Western Desert**, presented a startling spectacle to fastidious eyes, for from beneath the bronzed faces peering from the cabs of these battered, dirty trucks were blue-grey Italian uniforms.

At **Maadi** all this time the composite company of Supply Column and **Petrol Company** had been attending to base transport needs, and although its life was less arduous than that of its fellows in the desert, it was kept busy. On one assignment, the transfer of an ordnance depot from **Abbassia** to **Maadi**, drivers worked daily from 5 a.m. to 8.30 p.m. Mail and parcels were loads from **Tewfik**, and on one of these journeys Supply Column suffered its first fatal casualty; a three-tonner ran into a stationary Egyptian petrol wagon in the pitch black, and Driver **Elliott**¹⁰ was killed.

Lessons? Yes, there were plenty of lessons from this first taste of war. They were mainly elementary lessons of what service conditions could be like and of how to overcome the handicaps of inadequate equipment in a place where good equipment might be considered a prime necessity. Workshops Section, for instance, could do little but fitting work. Its workshop was a three-ton truck and its tools were what had been requisitioned from the kits sent out with the Column's trucks.

What Supply Column did not get, of course, was experience in working as part of a division. But this was not far away.

¹ **Capt W. G. Quirk**, MBE, m.i.d.; **Christchurch**; born **Timaru**, 5 Apr 1911; accountant.

² **Capt N. Taylor**; **Christchurch**; born **Blenheim**, 4 Jan 1905;

salesman.

³ Maj L. D. Hastie; Dunedin; born NZ, 9 Jan 1905; salesman.

⁴ Capt C. W. Butterfield, m.i.d.; born NZ, 23 Dec 1896; clerk; p.w. 2 Jun 1941.

⁵ Capt B. R. Dill; Te Awamutu; born Australia, 19 Apr 1917; clerk; p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

⁶ Maj E. P. Davis; Nelson; born NZ, 4 May 1904; salesman; OC Sup Coln (actg) 22 Sep-7 Nov 1940; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

⁷ An Italian device that looked like a khaki-coloured thermos flask; it was exploded by vibration.

⁸ Dvr A. F. Deaker; born NZ, 14 Jun 1908; butcher.

⁹ Dvr M. N. McDonald; born NZ, 16 Jul 1909; farmer; died of wounds 20 Apr 1941.

¹⁰ Dvr W. T. Elliott; born NZ, 12 Oct 1905; grocery manager; died on active service 18 Dec 1940.

SUPPLY COMPANY

CHAPTER 3 – SECOND AND THIRD ECHELONS

CHAPTER 3

Second and Third Echelons

THE war was still quiescent when the Second Echelon of 2 NZEF was mobilised on 12 January 1940, a week after the First Echelon had left for overseas, but by the time it sailed on 2 May the Norwegian campaign was in full swing, and when it was eight days out from New Zealand the German invasion of Luxembourg, Holland and Belgium, which was to develop into the rout of France, was begun.

Training of the Second Echelon details of Supply Column at Burnham was generally along the same lines as that for the First Echelon, although revised syllabi replaced earlier ones. After final leave the contingent sailed from New Zealand on 2 May in the ships *Empress of Britain*, *Aquitania*, *Empress of Japan* (later renamed *Empress of Scotland*) and *Andes*, all except the *Aquitania*, on which Supply Column embarked, modern vessels and designed for travel in the tropics.

These ships were joined in Australian waters by the *Queen Mary*, *Mauretania* and *Empress of Canada*, and continued west in two lines headed by the *Queen Mary* and *Empress of Canada*.

When the convoy cleared Fremantle early in May and headed north-west, Egypt seemed assuredly to be the destination, and in Egypt the First Echelon was preparing for the arrival of the Second. On 15 May, when near Cocos Island, the convoy abruptly changed course and on the 26th put into Cape Town. The *Aquitania*, being unable to berth in the harbour, had to go to the naval base at Simonstown. Here the officer commanding the Supply Column detachment, Captain Creeser,¹ who had become ill early in the voyage, was taken ashore, but died before he reached hospital.

The convoy remained at Cape Town until 31 May, but because of the difficulty of lightering, troops on the *Aquitania* had only one day's leave.

Continuing north, the convoy touched Sierra Leone, where there was no leave—and in the sultry heat no inclination for any. On 14 June, as the ships were approaching **Britain**, escort reinforcements consisting of six destroyers, the aircraft carrier *Argus* and the battle-cruiser *Hood*, joined the convoy. The next day the troops had a glimpse of the battle of the **Atlantic**. At 9 a.m. wreckage floated by, and later in the day the convoy passed a burning tanker, stern down and bow pointing to the sky. During the afternoon a lookout on the *Aquitania* reported that a torpedo, fired at long range, had passed astern of the *Hood* and between the *Queen Mary* and the *Aquitania*, and sank at the end of its run. The ships of the convoy heeled around at right angles and steamed away at full speed. The destroyers converged on a point away on the horizon and their depth-charges threw up white fountains.

On the beautiful morning of 16 June the convoy sailed up the Clyde in an atmosphere far removed from the disturbing news that French resistance was folding up. Supply Column members went ashore from the *Aquitania* in ferries, landing at the **Glasgow** suburb of Dunoon. The train journey was along the banks of the river, through vast ship-building areas, and on into the city itself, where the drab rows of slum houses struck a jarring note in the New Zealanders' introduction to **Britain**. Continuing through intensively cultivated market gardens, the train ran on to Edinburgh, where a meal halt gave the troops time for a glimpse of the Scottish capital.

The train crossed the border that afternoon and wound south through trim, hedge-lined fields and compact little villages. **Yorkshire** presented a less colourful vista of steel plants and coal mines, and vast networks of railway sidings. **York** was reached at dusk.

During the night the train halted for some hours in a tunnel, presumably because of enemy aircraft. As daylight broke the men saw sleeping villages and green fields flying past again. Reading station flashed by, and at **Aldershot** the train stopped. Led by the depot band of the RAMC, the troops marched through the town and across a common

to a camp—Cæsar's Camp—at Bourley.

The New Zealanders immediately fell into the life of the besieged island. First tasks for Supply Column were the digging of slit trenches and the setting up of an anti-aircraft gun at which a spotter was on duty throughout the day.

Supply Column shared in the transport work allotted to the NZASC and then took up its duties of issuing rations, its primary task during the stay in **Britain**. On 15 August more trucks were received and transport was organised into two sections, together with a headquarters and workshops section. This simplified work and increased the unit's efficiency.

Life generally was fairly pleasant as neighbouring villagers offered hospitality in off-duty hours, and troops found the English pub a pleasant place in which to pass evenings. Two days' leave was granted soon after arrival; many men went to **London**, and others to see relatives or friends.

Fifth Brigade was ordered to a defensive position on the Channel coast, and on 27 August Supply Column moved to Hollingbourne, near **Maidstone**. The brigade followed nine days later and was held as a mobile reserve for counter-attack in the event of invasion. After a conference of brigade and unit commanders called by **Major-General Freyberg**, who had come to **Britain** from **Egypt**, an operation order was published saying that enemy landings by sea and air were likely, and the New Zealand Division was to be prepared to counter-attack vigorously any enemy landings in **1 London Division's** area, especially north and north-west of **Dover** and **Folkestone**.

Though the invasion never came, there was at least one scare in late October when New Zealand Division (**UK**) issued an exercise order to test the time in which units could be cleared from their billeting areas. The orders to Supply Column were that it was to be ready to move two hours after midnight. Enemy planes were overhead while, in light rain and

darkness, gear was loaded onto trucks. In the absence of any explanation, the opinion was strongly held that the enemy was expected, but after a cheerless night a cancellation order came at dawn, and the affair fizzled out dismally into another routine day.

The Battle of **Britain** was now being fought in the air, and Supply Column men at their camp in **Kent** could see the formations of German bombers passing over and the curling vapour trails of dogfights too high for the aircraft to be seen. Some bombs fell in the district.

Towards the end of September the weather became cold and wet and the unit moved into more comfortable quarters in Hollingbourne House. Fifth Brigade was withdrawn from its defensive position and spent October near **Maidstone**. Early in November Supply Column returned to the **London** area, where it was billeted in Dene Lodge at Ash, seven miles from **Aldershot**. During November and December normal duties were carried out with the new handicaps of ice and mud.

Seven days' leave enabled troops to go as far afield as **Scotland**. At Dene Lodge the Column had an enjoyable Christmas in an unaccustomed wintry atmosphere.

Snow was falling on New Year's Day when the Second Echelon began to move from **Aldershot** to embarkation ports for the transfer to the **Middle East**. The ship carrying Supply Column waited a few days before joining the huge convoy bound for **Egypt** via the Cape.

Third Echelon members of Supply Column who entered **Burnham** Camp on 14 May 1940 provided two operating sections (D and H) to complete the unit. After receiving training similar to that of the two previous contingents, the **Burnham** men embarked on the **Orcades** at **Lyttelton** on 28 August. The convoy was joined by the liners **Mauretania** and **Empress of Japan** in Cook Strait, and by the **Aquitania**, with Australian troops aboard, before reaching **Fremantle**.

The convoy arrived at **Bombay** on 15 September, and the next day the troops on the **Orcades** disembarked and in sweltering heat marched

to the railway station. From there they were transported to the racecourse, where they bunked down in the grandstand. On the 18th Supply Column men embarked on the *Empress of Japan*, and the convoy, minus the *Ormonde*, sailed next day. The *Ormonde*, it was later found, had been delayed by the troops because of a complaint over the food and the dirty, crowded conditions.

Suez was reached on 29 September. The troops were landed by lighters the next day and marched into **Maadi** Camp late in the afternoon.

Headquarters **2 NZEF** at **Maadi** stated on 2 October that it was intended to complete all essential training of the Third Echelon—including **6 Brigade**—in six weeks. Because of the shortage of drivers in **2 NZEF** almost the whole of D and H Sections of Supply Column were soon supplied with vehicles and immediately began general transport work. Many took part in convoys to the **Western Desert**.

When the main body of Supply Column returned from the desert on 28 February, the two Third Echelon sections joined it for the first time. On 2 March **5 Brigade** reached **Suez** from **Britain** and next day the main body of Supply Column moved from **Maadi** to **Amiriya**, where on the 5th it was joined by five officers, among them **Major Pryde**,² formerly OC Ammunition Company in **Britain**, who took over command from Captain Stock. The latter was transferred to **4 Brigade** as supply officer.

At **Suez** the second draft of Supply Column, newly arrived from **Britain**, was hastily refitting. At **Amiriya**, the main part of the Column was busy, too. Workshops Section and drivers were stripping vehicles, replacing worn parts and generally tuning up trucks. One substantial task was the modification of the stub axles of 15-cwt Fordsons; desert experience had shown that these broke easily, and fifteen vehicles were fitted with stub axles of the unit's own manufacture. The trouble did not recur.

The **Suez** group joined the Column at **Amiriya** on 8 March, and for

the first time the unit was complete: it consisted of Headquarters, Nos. 1 and 2 Echelons, each with supply detail personnel attached, and Workshops Section. Its strength was 484 officers and men.

It was a narrow time margin that exemplified the desperate straits of the British forces in 1941. The next day the move from **Egypt** was begun. Where the Division was bound for few knew. Sun helmets and tropical kit had been issued, and the **Sudan** and **India** were among the conjectures; another theory was an invasion of **Tripoli** in North Africa. Not until they were at sea did the men learn that their destination was **Greece**.

¹ **Capt W. R. Creeser**; born **Manchester**, 27 Dec 1908; company manager; died 31 May 1940.

² **Maj N. M. Pryde**, MBE, ED; **Papakura**; born Waikaka Valley, Southland, 6 May 1899; bank accountant; Div Amn Coy Nov 1939-Mar 1941; OC Sup Coy 5 Mar 1941-5 Dec 1942; OC 2 Amn Coy Dec 1942-Jun 1943.

SUPPLY COMPANY

CHAPTER 4 – WITH THE DIVISION IN GREECE

CHAPTER 4

With the Division in Greece

GREECE had been fighting **Italy** since 28 October 1940, and had been fighting with more than moderate success. The Italian invasion was thrust back, and the Greeks in their turn invaded Italian-held **Albania**. During this period **Greece** would accept only air support, but when the concentration of German troops in **Bulgaria** early in March 1941 made it clear that an invasion was imminent, she had second thoughts on the subject and accepted what troops **Britain** could spare from the **Middle East**.

Major-General Freyberg was told on 17 February that the New Zealand Division would be sent to **Greece** as an advance guard of an Imperial force, and he sailed on 6 March with the first flight of troops across the **Mediterranean**. They reached **Piraeus** next day. The second flight, with which Supply Column sailed, was less fortunate. Some of its ships were smaller and slower and ran into heavy weather. Vehicles and drivers of the Column embarked on two ships, the *City of Norwich* and a Greek coaster, *Marit Maersk*, on 9 and 10 March, and on the 11th the remainder of the unit embarked on the 3000-ton HMS *Chakla*, an old troopship. The convoy put out from **Alexandria** early on the 12th. The sea was choppy but not unduly rough as the troops watched **Alexandria** dwindle away to a pinpoint and disappear below the horizon, but clouds were banking up and a brisk wind came scudding across the white-flecked sea. Off **Crete** the storm burst over the convoy. Deluged by towering seas and buffeted by a tearing wind, the ships scattered.

Packed away in crowded quarters below, men found rest as best they could. The *Chakla* was tossed about like a toy and the 1000 men beneath her battened-down hatches lived for three days in a stifling, fuggy atmosphere of stale air and vomit. During one period of twenty-four hours she covered only 40 miles.

Some ships put into **Suda Bay** for shelter and later straggled into

Piraeus in twos and threes. But of the poor little *Marit Maersk* there was no sign. Lord Haw Haw later reported her sunk. She wasn't, but there were times when some thought she might be. The *Marit Maersk*, with a top speed of eight knots, could make little headway against the gale and her master decided to run for shelter behind the south side of **Crete**. Water sluiced across the decks and poured onto the trucks below, submerging some of them in a glutinous mixture of oil and salt water.

By the time the main convoy had reached **Greece** the limping *Marit Maersk* had only reached a small cove on the coast of **Crete**. Here Sergeant **Jefcoate**,¹ who had been injured during the storm while assisting to move the kitbags of men who were ill, was put ashore. He was taken to **Canea** hospital, from which after a month's stay he was flown to **Athens** to rejoin the Column. The ship went on to **Suda Bay**, and from there was escorted to **Piraeus** by a Greek corvette, finally reaching port at midday on 17 March.

The only incident of note during this last part of the journey was Lord Haw Haw's announcement that the *Marit Maersk* had been sunk by a German submarine. Laughable as it might have been, the report showed one disturbing fact: there was clearly a close enemy check on what left **Alexandria** and what was arriving at **Piraeus**. Presuming the overdue ship to have been lost, the Germans were only too happy to take the credit.

The *Chakla*, meanwhile, had put into **Piraeus** at 11 a.m. on 15 March. Riding in open trucks along the wide, straight road to **Athens**, Supply Column men could see on their left the towering **Acropolis**, crowned by the ruins of the Parthenon. Italian prisoners on the march provided some men with their first close-up view of the enemy. The trucks crawled through the crowded streets of **Athens**, where Greeks waved and shouted their spontaneous welcome, and rolled on past the German Embassy, on which hung the swastika. There was some belligerent talk of pulling it down, but the men reluctantly deferred to the reasoning of their officers.

The Supply Column camp was tucked away in a pine grove at Kamponia, on the lower slopes of Mount Hymettus. It was a pretty spot, and looking up the men could see the mountains flecked with fresh snow.

There wasn't much time, and there was a great deal to do. The training programme, which included route marches through the picturesque, verdant countryside—soft relief for eyes used to the glare of **Egypt**—was pushed on, and Workshops Section faced the formidable task of reconditioning trucks that had come from the ships' holds sodden with salt water. Mechanical damage was extensive, and motors had to be dismantled and cleaned, electrical systems rewired, and parts replaced.

However, there was time to make friends with the Greeks and to see something of **Athens** and its inhabitants. There was champagne to be bought at 45 drachmae (1s. 8d.) a bottle, though it cost 440 drachmae in cabarets. There was also 1848 vintage wine to be bought at a monastery on a hill for 18 drachmae. Greek vocabularies that had been issued were well thumbed, and whether they went to see objects of ancient art or history or merely for entertainment, the men found the capital an agreeable city. The only note of unfriendliness was struck by a group of Germans outside the monastery who looked contemptuously at the New Zealanders and spat. On one day German civilians from the Embassy were uninvited guests to the Column's camp, where with interested eyes they strolled casually through the open park.

Within a few days of arrival the Column got down to serious work. On 19 March the unit was divided into two, and Headquarters, Workshops Section and No. 2 Echelon were sent to a staging camp at **Kifisia**, an hour's journey from **Athens**. No. 1 Echelon remained in the **Athens** area.

At 7 a.m. on 21 March the trucks of the **Kifisia** group climbed through the **Thebes** hills and ran north past Mount Parnassus through the richly green countryside on the first leg of the long journey to **Katerini**, in northern **Greece**. Their route took them through **Atalandi**

and along the coast to **Molos**.

Greece was a country the New Zealanders took to their hearts. It was a country of warm friendliness, of spontaneous welcome: as the trucks whined by, exuberant Greeks waved and shouted, 'Welcomss boyss howarya.' It was a country of classic beauty, of green and purple and pale blue hills, of olive groves and vineyards; and through the green ran a tinge of red from the multi-coloured soils. It was a country with an old-world charm, with its quaint churches in which storks nested, plodding mules and trim little donkeys, and shepherdesses in colourful costume. In the disasters to come later men consoled themselves with the thought that **Greece** was a country worth fighting for; and later still in the war, when the future employment of the Division appeared to hang in the balance, there were veterans of **Greece** who hoped to return.

On 21 March Supply Column men drank in the impressions that were the genesis of this spirit. They laagered that night south of **Lamia**, by a small sea enclosed by **Euboea Island**, where olive groves reached down to the water's edge. Some went in for a swim, though it was a cool night and balaclavas were welcome. Next day the convoy drove north through the morning mist, across the plain of **Thessaly** and into the rail and road junction of **Larisa**, a sorry sight after the double destruction of earthquake and Italian bombing.

Leaving the cobbled streets, the trucks travelled on for another five miles before a halt was called, 60 miles from the destination. Next day, the 23rd, the transport crested the foothills to the north and reached the base of the towering mountain range dominated by the snow-capped **Mount Olympus**. The road zigzagged steeply through the wooded pass, then dipped down through a narrow, sunless defile where **Ay Dhimitrios** clung to the mountainside. That morning the convoy passed through **Katerini** and moved on another two and a half miles to the village of **Neon Keramidhi**, and in an environment so unwarlike as to suggest a rest camp preparations were begun.

It was a green, open country. A river ran by the tented camp, and

the dominating mass of **Olympus**, its peak often wreathed in cloud, was a constant background. Red anemones grew wild, and butterflies added a final idyllic touch. In nearby **Katerini** men found plenty to interest them, and friendships were quickly made. The town's shops, quaint to New Zealand eyes, were well stocked, and meals of eggs and chips, and sometimes lamb chops, could be bought in its restaurants.

To supply the forward areas a chain of administration centres was set up. With **Athens** as Base, **Larisa** was chosen as Advanced Base. From **Larisa** four field supply depots were planned, at **Katerini**, **Veroia**, **Edhessa** and **Amindaion**. As the New Zealand Division was supplied by a daily train from **Athens**, Supply Column was free to help other administration units stock the FSDs.

The Column took over 4 FSD at the railhead at **Katerini** from an RASC unit, and moved the depot to a schoolhouse at **Neon Keramidhi**. The transfer took three days, and issues began to New Zealand units.

No. 1 Echelon, meanwhile, was still back at **Athens** carrying out transport supply duties in base sub-area. Over 26, 27 and 28 March this group moved to a point about 40 miles north of **Larisa**, hard up to **Mount Olympus** on the southern side, and came under the control of 1 **Australian Corps**, shortly to become **Anzac Corps**. Here, about three miles north of the **Servia- Katerini-Flasson** road junction on the **Katerini- Elasson** road, its transport section was employed in stocking up 1 FSD from the railhead at **Larisa**, and supply details worked beside RASC men preparatory to taking over the depot on the night of 6–7 April. This depot supplied some units, but the orders given to the officer in charge, Captain **Jacobs**,² were to form and hold a depot which would operate as a reserve.

New Zealand units, as they moved up into position, drew from both these depots, those east of **Ay Dhimitrios** from 4 FSD and those south of **Olympus Pass** from 1 FSD. They called for supplies with their own transport, which left Supply Column vehicles free to do the tasks involved in establishing both depots and to bring fresh supplies from

Salonika.

Thus, at the eleventh hour, preparations went ahead. Supplies, discharged from ships in the south, came north by rail, and thence by truck along the crowded, twisting roads. North along these roads, too, went other trucks, together with guns, miles of them. No one could know then that all this effort was too late and too little.

The prospect was appalling. For the defenders of **Greece** it was one of those moments in life when it is better not to know what the future holds. Here, at the beginning of April, Supply Column was assembling its dumps with the patient faith of a man setting himself up in a dry watercourse while his fellows construct a flimsy dam upstream to check a deluge it is known must come. And the dam was never finished.

On the Bulgarian frontier were about ten German divisions, with only weak Greek divisions to check them. **New Zealand Division** and **1 Armoured Brigade** were in forward areas, and **6 Australian Division** was arriving. The line chosen for the defence of **Greece**, the **Aliakmon** line, ran from **Neon Elevation**, on the coast, to a point near **Mount Kaimakchalan**, with a detachment at **Amindaion** to cover the **Monastir Gap**, through which entry could be gained to **Greece** from **Yugoslavia**. Although it was hoped that the Yugoslavs would fight, a second position based on the formidable range around **Mount Olympus** and the western end of the **Aliakmon River** was reconnoitred; this line did not depend on Yugoslav participation.

New Zealand Division prepared to hold the east end of the **Aliakmon** line in an area just north of **Katerini**, which of course is why **Supply Column** set up 4 **FSD** near that town. Just behind this and forward of the **Olympus** positions, road and bridge demolitions were prepared. **Fourth and 6 Brigades** were in the forward line, while **5 Brigade** was in reserve preparing positions on the slopes of **Mount Olympus**, with **21 Battalion** at **Platamon**.

Detached from the Division, **27 (Machine Gun) Battalion**, less two

companies, was with the **Amindaion** detachment. A Supply Column vehicle attached to it operated with it throughout the campaign.

The Germans struck down through **Greece** and **Yugoslavia** on 6 April, and by the 9th Western Thrace and **Salonika** had been swallowed up. Supplies of fruit and vegetables ceased coming to Supply Column on the 8th, but the imminence of German occupation appeared to have no detrimental effect on the inhabitants' hospitality. Lieutenant **Tomlinson**,³ who visited the city on that day, returned with gifts of Albanian lace and memories of a hero's reception.

Driving down through **Yugoslavia** against negligible opposition, the Germans reached the **Monastir Gap** on 9 April, threatening to drive a wedge between the British forces in the Aliakmon line and the Greek forces still grappling with the Italians further west. The **Amindaion** detachment was reinforced, and **4 Brigade** moved to **Servia** to act as a pivot for the now necessary withdrawal to the **Olympus- Aliakmon River** line; No. 2 Echelon of Supply Company helped to carry **20 Battalion** in this move. This left **6 Brigade** with an open flank, but on 9 April New Zealand Division was ordered to draw back to the **Olympus Pass** and **Platamon** railway tunnel positions. Sixth Brigade went back to **Elasson**, leaving **5 Brigade** the forward positions on the **Olympus** line. By the evening of 10 April the New Zealanders were ready in the second line of defence.

All this shifting and shuffling would be complicated enough if it involved only troops. But there was a great deal more to it than that. The step backwards left **Neon Keramidhi** in no-man's-land, and in a hectic two days every pound of supplies, so carefully built up by Supply Column, had to be packed and shifted back; at the same time supply dumps had to be established for the new positions.

The first ripple of this upheaval reached the Column at 11 p.m. on the 8th in the shape of an order to dump ten days' rations in the battalion areas of two of **5 Brigade's** battalions, which were already in their defensive positions at the northern entrance to **Olympus Pass**. In

addition, thirteen days' rations were to be railed to **21 Battalion**, which was guarding the **Platamon** tunnel, between **Olympus** and the sea. Loading began at 2.30 a.m. on the 9th, and though the Column was short of trucks because of the absence of No. 1 Echelon at 1 FSD, the supplies for the **Olympus** position were delivered by 8.30 a.m. that day, and soon afterwards the supplies for **21 Battalion** were packed aboard railway trucks at **Katerini**.

That was a reasonably vigorous start. The next disturbance came from oral orders during the morning to evacuate 4 FSD. First 10,000 rations and 5000 gallons of petrol were to be dumped at the 9 kilometre post at the entrance to **Olympus Pass**, and 25,000 rations were to be dumped in **6 Brigade's** area at **Elasson**; all that then remained at **Neon Keramidhi** was to be railed to **Larisa**. The order for **6 Brigade's** rations was later cancelled.

The **Olympus Pass** dump was established, normal issues for the day made to units, and then the Column began its huge task of clearing away from the path of the approaching enemy 300,000 rations and 86,000 gallons of petrol, in all 1000 tons. Officers and men bent their backs, and by midday the trucks were shuttling over the three miles between **Neon Keramidhi** and the railhead at **Katerini**. Help arrived in the form of twenty three-tonners from No. 1 Echelon, which had come forward to carry back **20 Battalion** but were not yet required. They continued to assist until evening.

As the work went on into the night, rain and mist came down and the wheels churned the ground around the railway sidings into cloying bog. At last, at 2.30 a.m. on the 10th, when the men had been working twenty-four hours without a break, work was called off for a few hours and there was time to snatch a little sleep. In the bleak early hours the men were roused, and the trucks began moving again. By midday there remained only twenty-five tons of biscuits.

During the morning four trucks were despatched to recover tentage left by **4 Brigade**. On the assumption that it had been abandoned the

Greek civilians had already descended on the camp and swept it clear of canvas, but after some hard talking it was recovered.

The pile of biscuit boxes was dwindling, and at 3 p.m. twenty **Petrol Company** three-tonners arrived and gave a hand with the remainder of the biscuits and with engineer stores that had to be moved from Gannokhora.



All this feverish activity was watched by the Greeks in bewilderment. They had seen no fighting to warrant a withdrawal, and they were aware of no imminent danger. One who spoke a little English asked, ‘What are the British going to do to stop the Germans?’

Still the Column's task, after more than thirty-six hours, was not ended. The dump at Kilo 9, established only the previous day, had to be moved back 12 miles into **5 Brigade's** area; this was done by 7.30 p.m., and at last the Column was free to retire. In the grey dusk the trucks moved out of **Neon Keramidhi**. Mist turned to rain, and though the trucks ground up **Olympus Pass** with headlights burning, several jolted into the ditch and had to be coaxed back onto the road. In steady rain the Column reached the fork of **Olympus** and **Portas** passes— **4 Brigade** was in **Portas Pass**—at 2.30 a.m. on the 11th, just forty-eight hours after the unit began breaking up **4 FSD**. It had been intended to join No. 1 Echelon, still under corps command, at **1 FSD**, but this echelon had moved up to a new location four miles north of **Elasson**, leaving only supply details at the depot.

A laager was chosen for the main body of the Column, but it did not allow adequate dispersal and during the day the unit moved back to high ground south of **Elasson**.

New Zealand Division and other units in the **Olympus** area now depended solely on 1 FSD for their rations. This was a heavy undertaking for one depot, and to ease the strain No. 2 Echelon on 12 April set up a DID which worked in conjunction. This system was satisfactory.

While members of the main part of the Column had been blistering their hands and straining their eyes in long hours of work and driving, the transport of No. 1 Echelon had been busy too. On the day it helped to clear 4 FSD at **Neon Keramidhi** (the 9th) the trucks left camp at 4 a.m. and scrambled through **Olympus Pass**—‘A real mountain track,’ says a driver—in the dark. After helping at **Neon Keramidhi** they went on to the Aliakmon line, picked up 4 **Brigade** men and took them to **Portas Pass**, arriving back at camp at half-past two next morning.

After an hour's rest they were sent away again through **Portas Pass** and on beyond **Kozani**. With guns muttering in the distance, they loaded up stores from the **Amindaion** dump and moved south again, gathering up en route a host of refugees, many of them women and children.

There was time now for a brief rest; but the peaceful remoteness of the earlier days was gone, and **Greece's** beauty was veiled by rain.

On the 11th a No. 1 Echelon driver (Driver **Coulson** ⁴) noted cryptically in his diary: ‘In camp. Maintenance on truck. Raining like hell. Hard to keep dry.’

During 12, 13 and 14 April the Column was engaged in a variety of tasks reminiscent of its general-carrier role in the desert: it carried ammunition, wire and troops for corps, established dumps along the line of defence, and delivered rations for units unable to collect them. The black-crossed wings of the **Luftwaffe** were about now, but at first Supply

Column escaped notice. For the first few days there was only one air attack. This was when a German plane swept down on a truck, shattering the windscreen and riddling the cab with machine-gun bullets. Driver **Richards**⁵ and his companion escaped into a culvert. The plane returned and raked the culvert, but they were not hit.

So far aircraft were the only sign of the enemy around the **Olympus** line, and there was still time to reach forward and salvage supplies. On 12 April thirty-five Supply Column three-tonners carried 10,000 rations, petrol, wire and ammunition through **Servia** (**Portas**) Pass, across the **Aliakmon River**, through **Kozani** and back in a southwesterly direction along a shocking clay road. There were a few enemy aircraft droning about, and the front was not far away; the undertones of artillery fire could be heard just beyond a snow-capped ridge. Returning through **Kozani** the convoy was fired on by enemy artillery at long range, but the shells fell well away from the road.

On the run south the convoy halted, as ordered, at 2 FSD, north of the **Aliakmon River** bridge, but found it empty. After waiting about the men heard that a Captain Weir at 3 FSD, a British dump to the north-east, had no transport, and they retraced their steps. At 3 FSD they picked up 25-pounder ammunition, which they had heard was short, petrol, rum, tinned fruit, Papistratos White cigarettes and various other commodities, including woollen underclothing. They burned what was left and as a final touch squirted out the contents of fire extinguishers, and moved away south to reach the **Aliakmon River** bridge at **Servia** before it was blown at 8 p.m. The trucks rolled across with an hour and a quarter to spare. As the convoy twisted back in snow and sleet through the New Zealand lines in **Portas Pass**, some of the luxuries picked up from the dumps—in particular the cigarettes—were distributed. The transformation of expression on the strained, tired faces of the chilled men as they saw these ‘gifts from the gods’ handed down was reward for this thoughtfulness. It was a small but important part in fulfilment of the Column's role of catering for the troops. It was a constant task, not to be neglected even in the extremes of a snow-dusted withdrawal.

Aircraft came down as the convoy crawled through the pass, but the trucks got away unscathed.

The next day, 13 April, the Germans began to close in. On the left they came through the **Monastir Gap; on the right from south of **Salonika**. With the support of some **5 Field Regiment** guns, the New Zealand Divisional Cavalry, which had been patrolling the Aliakmon, delayed the crossing of this river. This group came back through **Olympus Pass**, the last of it on the afternoon of the 14th, and high explosive charges closed the road.**

Within two hours of the last cavalry group's passing, German motorcyclists came riding brazenly up the pass road. On the coast **21 Battalion and New Zealand guns checked an armoured thrust at the **Platamon** tunnel, and in the **Portas Pass 4 Brigade** met forces coming down from **Monastir**.**

Pressure in the form of dive-bombers came on **Portas Pass on 13 April, and German infantry came into the attack after sustained bombing on the 15th. They were repelled with heavy casualties, and the next day the position was still held. In the **Olympus** region fighting began on 15 April, and here too the line was unbroken next day.**

Aircraft were everywhere: droning Dorniers, screaming Stukas and whining Messerschmitt fighters. One of the lasting impressions the New Zealanders brought out of **Greece was of the terror from the sky. On 14 April Supply Column had its first real taste of it.**

No. 1 Echelon moved south a little way on this day and dispersed at a road fork near a bridge about a mile north of **Elasson. During the morning the men watched **Elasson** 'catch a packet'. In the afternoon the Stukas came back; their target might have been the bridge but No. 1 Echelon's area was well in line for its share. The Stukas came weaving through the black ack-ack rosettes, formed into line and came screaming down. From its high ground to the south Column Headquarters watched appalled as bomb bursts blanketed the area with**

smoke. Dive-bombing is an awesome spectacle. A New Zealand infantryman recalls: 'We would stand and watch an area being plastered. The planes would come howling down, and the whole area would be smothered with smoke and explosions. All you could think was, "Poor bastards".'

But the spectators at Column Headquarters had cause to think of their own safety too. Two Messerschmitt fighters broke away to machine-gun Australian transport approaching the area, and there was a scatter. Greek anti-aircraft guns brought down one plane.

Despite the noise and commotion, No. 1 Echelon came through unscathed. The raid clearly showed the vulnerability of its area, however, and it rejoined the rest of the unit south of **Elasson**. Except for the men at 1 FSD, the unit was again complete.

On this same day aircraft machine-gunned Greek Army transport south of **Elasson**. The drivers bolted, leaving the road cluttered with carts, mules and horses, which Column men cleared away.

The decision to withdraw to the **Thermopylae** line was made on 14 April, as the existing line was too long for the troops available. Sixth Brigade and Divisional Cavalry were to provide the rearguard for **Anzac Corps**. Fifth Brigade, less **21 Battalion**, was to withdraw from **Olympus**, followed by **4 Brigade** from the **Servia** position. The 21st Battalion at the **Platamon** tunnel was to withdraw through the **Pinios Gorge**, but as all roads converged on **Larisa** this battalion and additional Australian troops were to hold the gorge until the town was cleared. Careful timing was necessary to allow all groups to clear **Larisa**.

The thinning out began on the 15th. Troops had to be brought out of the line and stores lifted back, but in the confusion of a general withdrawal and constant air attacks there were inevitable delays and short tempers. Two convoys of trucks, one of them from Supply Column, went to **Larisa** to do a job that had been done earlier in the day by another group of trucks. Supply Column transport moving forward to a

point north of **Elasson** to pick up ammunition was twice ordered back before, on its third run up, it completed its journey, on each trip running the gauntlet of bombers. Twenty-nine bombers were hammering **Elasson** during the last run through.

Elasson on this day was pounded to pulp. Buildings gaped open, streets were cluttered with rubble, wires were tangled across the debris. Dazed people wandered about as though in a trance. In the midst of this E Section of Supply Column, strung out through the town and around the square in the centre, was untouched, though buildings crumbled on either side.

At 9 p.m. oral orders came from Corps to send forward trucks to bring out **19 Australian Infantry Brigade** from **Portas Pass** and a company of **2/4 Australian Battalion** from the Corps Headquarters area near **Elasson**. Twenty-seven three-tonners sent to pick up **19 Brigade** reached the rendezvous at midnight, an hour after the arranged time, but the infantry had not yet appeared. There was still no sign of them in the morning, and the trucks sat there until late afternoon, when the tired men came straggling out. Tins of M and V (meat and vegetables) heated on the exhaust manifolds of the trucks gave them a welcome meal; even while troop-carrying the column remembered its slogan.

The brigade was incomplete, however, and there were only enough men to fill twenty-two trucks. These set off for **Dhomokos**, about half-way between **Larisa** and **Thermopylae**, where a rearguard stand was to be made.

Still missing was a company of **2/4 Battalion**, and though it was thought it might have been cut off, the remaining five trucks under Second-Lieutenant **Ward**⁶ waited in the pass. This decision was to give a queer twist to the story when the Column met up again in southern **Greece**.

The twenty-two trucks of the main convoy reached **Dhomokos** without attention from the enemy, but the seven vehicles under

Lieutenant Tomlinson that had gone to the corps area to pick up the other company of 2/4 Battalion were not so lucky. These trucks picked up their men at 1 a.m. on the 16th, and as they drove south from Larisa were harassed from the air. Two Australians were killed and four wounded.

Having unloaded the troops at Dhomokos, all vehicles returned to the unit, where they were anxiously awaited.

Column Headquarters and Workshops were ordered back to Atalandi on 16 April while these two convoys were away. But simultaneously the unit was also instructed to send forward all available transport to a dispersal area at the junction of the Olympus and Portas pass roads to bring out 4 Brigade, which was still in position above Servia. Twenty-three vehicles under Captain Hook ⁷ reached the area at 7 p.m. and settled down to wait.

This left the rest of the unit near Elasson immobilised, but the return of the trucks from Dhomokos saved the situation. Column Headquarters and Workshops moved out in heavy rain at 6.15 p.m. on the 17th. The protective rain kept up until they were south of Larisa. Journeying south J Section adapted itself to the role of an LAD and was constantly pausing to drag back to the road trucks that had gone astray. With tanks almost drained, the trucks reached Atalandi at noon on the 18th.

All this time Ward's trucks had been waiting patiently in Portas Pass for the missing company of 2/4 Battalion. Late on the afternoon of the 17th the watch was given up, and ammunition, petrol and various supplies loaded. The trucks had gone only 14 miles when they overtook seventy-five weary survivors of the missing company. Part of the ammunition was jettisoned and the seventy-five men taken on to Dhomokos.

Reaching Atalandi on the afternoon of 18 April Ward found himself the unit's deliverer. Petrol was critically short; Supply Column was

almost immobilised and some trucks of Ammunition Company were drained dry. The petrol brought back from the pass enabled a petrol-seeking convoy to be sent out. On the discovery of petrol depended the Column's final withdrawal to **Thermopylae** and of course the withdrawal of the troops it was to carry.

While the rest of the Column had been making its various ways south, Hook's twenty-two trucks were still waiting for **4 Brigade**. Under cover of darkness the exhausted, mudplastered infantrymen came out of their battle positions during the night of 17–18 April. Embussing began about midnight and the last vehicle cleared the area about 3.30 a.m. In pouring rain they trundled south along the slippery, winding highway, their occupants taking some comfort from the fact that every mile covered in darkness or rain was a mile further from the **Luftwaffe**. Still in darkness, they filed through **Larisa**, and as the first light of dawn was streaked across the sky were running across the plains of **Thessaly** along the only road to the south now open; the road from **Larisa** to **Volos**, along which it had been intended that the New Zealanders should go, had been closed by rain and incomplete reconstruction.

The bright sunlight of a clear day revealed a crawling nose-to-tail column of vehicles reaching across the plain. Four miles north of Farsala movement ceased. As far as the eye could see the road ahead was choked with idle transport—New Zealand, Australian, English and Greek. There was nothing to do but grumble, roll a cigarette and wait.

Around 8 a.m., with unfailing punctuality, a German reconnaissance plane droned overhead, then swung away home hot-foot with the glad news. There was a general stir on the ground as drivers and troops scattered in search of shelter. An hour later the throbbing note of approaching aircraft came from the north, and the first flights of fighters and bombers came winging down on the congested road. Unchallenged except for the futile spitting of Brens and rifles, they ranged along the road at tree-top level in roaring procession. The still sodden earth erupted into fountains, and machine-gun bullets spattered on culverts and ripped through canopies, cabs and windscreens.

Throughout the day the German pilots made the most of this gift target, and there was nothing else to do but grovel in a trench or culvert and let the storm pass overhead. Apparently something was happening up ahead, however, for during the afternoon the jam eased, and about 4 p.m., with the planes still biting at their heels, the trucks were moving along the road again. When dusk came the harassing planes drew off, and after ten hours' continual bombardment the trucks jolted along through the night in peace. The troops were debussed late on the morning of 19 April, and the vehicles rejoined the unit, now at **Atalandi**.

There were several stragglers on this trek south. One was the breakdown Thornycroft known as 'Flannagan', which became detached from the main convoy on the way to **Atalandi**. South of **Lamia**, Drivers **Hyland**⁸ and **Roberts**⁹ pulled off for a brew up. Nearby was a broken-down English quad to which was attached a medium field piece. The Tommies were having little success with their repair attempts and finally came over to the Thornycroft and asked for a tow.

The New Zealanders couldn't offer a tow for both the quad and gun, but as the Tommies were anxious to get the gun under cover, they were willing to take this. The Thornycroft paraded proudly into the camp at **Atalandi** with this piece of ordnance behind it—who else had got themselves a gun?—and Hyland offered it as ack-ack protection for the sorely tried Column. No one was willing to try his hand, and the gun remained a proud though idle possession until the artillerymen retrieved it.

Almost the last trucks to rejoin the unit were those of a convoy detailed to pick up quartermaster's stores that had been left at **Elasson**. These were salvaged without trouble, but yellow-nosed Messerschmitts hounded the trucks all the way south. As each attack came down the drivers fled for shelter, returning and continuing the journey when the danger had passed. After a hazardous trip of stops and starts they reached **Atalandi**, only to find that surplus equipment was to be destroyed.

When an army retires one of its incidental problems is to clear away its supply dumps—either to shift them back with it or to destroy them. An army naturally likes to take its supplies with it—as New Zealand Division did when it pulled back behind the **Olympus** line—but in mid-April 1941 the army had little time to withdraw the troops and wasn't particularly concerned what happened to supplies, provided the enemy didn't get them.

That left the issue delightfully simple: destroy everything left behind. Simple enough in principle, but in the circumstances in which 1 FSD found itself profoundly complex. Holding enough supplies for an army, it was not permitted to do anything that would give the enemy any clue of what was happening.

This order came to Jacobs and McIndoe, who were in charge of the DID, from General Headquarters in **Greece** and was given orally by an officer, who told them the date of the intended withdrawal and that Corps would advise them later of their destination. Jacobs asked whether he could blow up his dump, as explosives were available from Ammunition Company across the road. The answer was no.

As a precaution Jacobs placed petrol tins near all dumps and applied himself to a less conspicuous way of destroying the dump.

The enemy undoubtedly knew of the dump, for a German Fiesler Storch, a slow-flying reconnaissance plane, had already circled the area, apparently taking photographs.

‘I ordered all details out with their rifles and we opened rapid fire,’ writes McIndoe. ‘It was apparently effective because the Jerry fired a white Very light, probably hoping to induce us [to believe] that he was one of ours, and lit out smartly.’

Jacobs and McIndoe asked Division for some protection, and two or three carriers were sent and took up positions on high ground around the FSD.

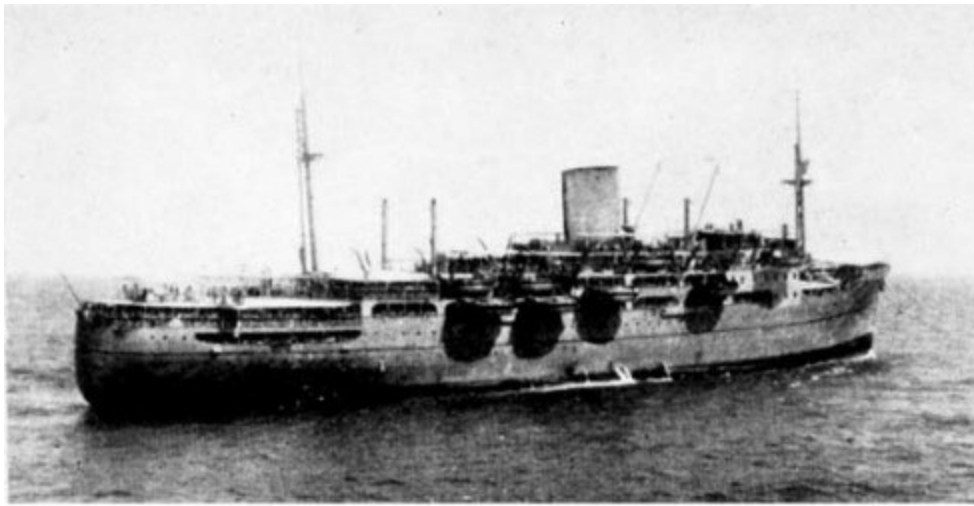
The breaking up of the dump began on 15 April, as trucks streamed south past the area. Standing on the roadside, a group of men threw onto passing vehicles anything troops wanted or would take. When units came for their normal issues next day they were simply given as much as they could take, and were told there was more if trucks were brought back for another load. The open-handed issue continued from the roadside and appreciable inroads were made into some commodities, but there were still large quantities of foodstuffs on the ground. Staff-Sergeant Reese¹⁰ writes:

The final day (17 April) in the life of this supply point was a miserable one. A thin, misty rain made the already wet ground a quagmire. Units drew into the area for the last time, and the issuers saw that all went away with as much as they wanted. Drivers from the units and the staff exchanged brief farewells, cheerily making appointments for the next rendezvous. They had grown to know each other well. We all knew that bitter fighting was going on and we wondered if and when we would see each other again, though no one had any premonitions of impending disaster.

Units had now taken all they could, and still there was more. Jacobs had already informed the gendarmerie at the nearest village that villagers could take what they wanted on the final day, and dozens of Greeks now stood around. They were told to help themselves. Reese continues:

They rushed from place to place, picking up this and that. Bewilderment was soon written on their faces. They could not read English and did not know what was in the various tins. The chaps led them from one stack to another and told them what to take and what to leave. Small donkeys were soon seen, heavily laden, being rushed away and brought back for more loads. Tea, flour, sugar and salt they recognised, and many disturbances had to be quelled as they fought to secure possession. The depot staff quickly checked this by taking charge

and issuing to the people, who were told to file past in line.



The *Sobieski*
The *Sobieski*



Supply Column on the after-deck of the *Sobieski*
Supply Column on the after-deck of the *Sobieski*



Rough going behind Maadi in March 1940
Rough going behind Maadi in March 1940



Supply railhead at Abu Haggag—Capt H. M. Jacobs
Supply railhead at Abu Haggag— Capt H. M. Jacobs



Railhead in the Western Desert
Railhead in the Western Desert



Collecting unit rations
Collecting unit rations



Dumping petrol in the Western Desert
Dumping petrol in the Western Desert

Ration convoy



Ration convoy

Anything that could be used as a container was pressed into service. Old men and women—even toddling kiddies—came past, and one or other of the various commodities was doled out into sacks, hankies, hats and shirts. One man took off his boots and filled them with salt. A woman turned her back and a minute later faced about with a pair of long-legged bloomers in her hands. By tying the extremities with string she had a pair of twin sacks, into one of which a soldier poured flour while a sergeant gravely filled the other with tea. We found old sacks and reserved them for the kiddies, giving them as much as they could carry.

Some folk were greedy and loaded so much on their donkeys that they collapsed under their loads. Never had these people seen so much food before. To them it represented a time of plenty—if they could hide it from the advancing Germans.

But still there was more food than could be given away. Cases were smashed open, tins pierced, and petrol poured over biscuits. Hour after hour the destruction went on: two or three men spent the afternoon on a huge stack of tinned milk, puncturing each tin and tossing it into a nearby creek.

A trickier prospect was an adjoining petrol dump, which was not really Supply Column's responsibility at all. Here **Petrol Company** had about 25,000 gallons of petrol in cases and 1000 gallons of oil in steel drums camouflaged under prickly scrub in small gullies. A sergeant and two men were operating the dump.

On 15 April McIndoe was told by the sergeant that he had no orders, but that he thought the ASC would lift the dump. Three three-tonners turned up a day or so later, loaded up and left.

At 3 p.m. on the 17th, while Greeks swarmed over the supply dump, McIndoe walked over to the petrol dump and was appalled at the huge quantity of petrol and oil still remaining. The sergeant and two men had gone. McIndoe decided to destroy what was left. He summoned all men

available and set to work with axes and spades, gashing at cases and tins and spilling the contents on the ground. A few cases were set aside for Divisional Cavalry, which was to fight a rearguard action.

‘Rivers of pink petrol were soon running down the gullies, and the men were ankle deep in it,’ writes McIndoe. ‘The fumes were overpowering at times, and I was afraid a spark from an axe or shovel striking a stone would send up the whole area, including ourselves, in a gigantic burst of fire.’

For two hours the men toiled, their hands torn by the thorns of the camouflage, their clothes soaked with sweat. Petrol fumes rose around them in an invisible choking fog. When the petrol was gone, they turned to the oil.

Jacobs, meanwhile, still had no orders to withdraw, but about 6 p.m., learning that the **Maori Battalion**, the last troops between the depot and the enemy, were pulling out, ordered his men to stand by and asked whether the battalion's Bren carriers could shield his convoy while it got away.

As they slashed at the oil drums, the men in the **Petrol Company** area could see the others perched on top of the loaded trucks, anxiously watching the thinning line of vehicles go by.

Just before we emptied the last of the oil drums (says McIndoe) a despatch rider left the road and bumped over the rough ground in our direction. He pulled up and saluted and said, ‘Excuse me, sir, but I think you had better start moving. The Jerries are just coming down the pass.’ There was no time to waste. We nipped over to our trucks—the engines were running—clambered aboard and were off at the high port. On the way down the road we passed Div Cav carriers, which had taken up positions to fight a delaying action. I advised their commander where I had left the petrol.

The convoy shuffled south along the sloppy road, part of a column crawling along without lights. At the top of a hill north of **Elasson**

Jacobs encountered **Major-General Freyberg** and **Colonel Stewart**¹¹ and was told to go back to **Thermopylae**, where he would be further directed. **Elasson** was a complete ruin, and at **Larisa** there was an interminable wait caused by bomb craters. The trucks drove south throughout the night, squeezing through **Lamia**, crowded with Greek soldiers and refugees, just before the **Luftwaffe** gave it another plastering. Near **Thermopylae** the convoy was directed to **Atalandi**.

¹ **Sgt H. P. Jefcoate**; Dunedin; born Dunedin, 12 Jan 1908; mechanic; wounded May 1941.

² **Capt H. M. Jacobs**; Dunedin; born NZ, 17 Nov 1909; tobacconist.

³ **Capt J. S. Tomlinson**; born Dunedin, 7 Feb 1914; bank officer.

⁴ **L-Cpl R. K. Coulson**; born NZ, 29 Jan 1917; farm labourer.

⁵ **Sgt R. W. Richards**; Hororata; born **Christchurch**, 10 Jul 1912; truck driver.

⁶ **Capt D. C. Ward**; **Wellington**; born NZ, 24 Apr 1905; motor driver; wounded Jun 1941.

⁷ **Capt G. A. E. Hook**; Hastings; born Marton, 10 Jan 1905; motor mechanic; p.w. 17 Jun 1941.

⁸ **Dvr E. S. Hyland**, m.i.d.; **Amberley**; born NZ, 18 Jul 1906; contractor.

⁹ **Cpl T. Roberts**; **Invercargill**; born **Tasmania**, 14 Jul 1903; fitter.

¹⁰ **S-Sgt T. C. J. Reese**; **Christchurch**; born **Christchurch**, 5 Nov

1905; civil servant.

¹¹ **Maj-Gen K. L. Stewart**, CB, CBE, DSO, m.i.d., MC (Greek), Legion of Merit (US); **Kerikeri**; born **Timaru**, 30 Dec 1896; Regular soldier; **1 NZEF** 1917–19; GSO1 2 NZ Div 1940–41; Deputy Chief of General Staff Dec 1941-Jul 1943; comd 5 Bde Aug-Nov 1943, 4 Armd Bde Nov 1943-Mar 1944, and 5 Bde Mar-Aug 1944; p.w. 1 Aug 1944-Apr 1945; comd 9 Bde (**2 NZEF, Japan**) Nov 1945-Jul 1946; Adjutant-General, NZ Military Forces, Aug 1946-Mar 1949; Chief of General Staff Apr 1949-Mar 1952.

SUPPLY COMPANY

CHAPTER 5 – EVACUATION

CHAPTER 5

Evacuation

CHECKED only by **6 Brigade's** covering action at **Elasson**, the Germans drove through **Greece** towards the new British line based on a spur of the **Pindus** mountains, where the **Anzac Corps** had taken up its positions by **19 April**. The central rail and road pass of **Brallos** was covered by the **Australians** and the famous **Thermopylae** Pass by **New Zealand Division**. Positions were dug, barbed wire erected and guns sited in preparation for the stand.

The main part of the rearguard came scrambling back during the night of **18–19 April**, and **Australian** units, which with the support of the **NZ Divisional Cavalry** and **7 NZ Anti-Tank Regiment** had manned the **Dhomokos** position, came through the line the following night.

The assembly of **Supply Column** four or five miles east of **Atalandi** was completed by the **19th**. **Atalandi**, in low, tree-covered hills, was admirably placed to provide cover and was within easy reach of the **Molos** and **Thermopylae** positions.

Fatigue now hung heavily on everyone. In the ten days since they had begun to clear away **4 FSD** at **Neon Keramidhi**, the **Supply Column** men had worked and driven long hours, sometimes with rests of only a few hours in several days' continuous driving through darkness, rain and sleet and along rough, winding roads under the pressure of imperative speed and air bombardment.

But there was always something to do. Food, fortunately, was plentiful, thanks to the wholesale distribution by **1 FSD**, but petrol was low. **Supply Column** did not have enough to travel ten miles; **Petrol Company** had even less, and one of its sections was completely immobile. Where petrol was to be found was a problem, and until **Second-Lieutenant Ward's** convoy arrived, how it was to be obtained was even more puzzling. No dumps could be found around **Atalandi**. **Divisional** and **Corps Headquarters** were still on the move and could not

be found, and all that could be learned from Force Headquarters, then 12 miles east of Thisvi, was that dumps were being established at Kifissokhori, **Levadhia** and on the coast road four miles north of **Livanatais**, but how much was there, if any, was uncertain. The Column was asked to try the first two dumps first, as the **Livanatais** one was intended to supply forward troops.

Their tanks replenished with the petrol brought down from **Portas Pass**, six Supply Column and six **Petrol Company** trucks, all under Second-Lieutenant Ward, set out for **Levadhia**. They reached the railway station some time after midnight on 20 April and found on a siding a mixed pack train. Petrol was found and loading begun, but because it was difficult in the dark to distinguish what was being handled, work was suspended until it was light. In the morning it was found that the train contained high octane aviation spirit which the RTO had orders to hold. It was therefore decided to complete the load with oil.

Half a load of oil had been stacked on the first truck when the familiar angry drone of aircraft was heard. There was a scatter as the first Stukas peeled off and came screaming down on the station. Bombs squarely hit the trucks containing the aviation spirit, and the rake flared up in a towering sheet of flame. In a moment the blaze had spread to adjacent ammunition wagons, and 25 and 60 pounder shells erupted with a roar. Only 20 feet from the blazing train were stacked 2000 rounds of high-explosive shells and mines.

The RTO may have been justified in pronouncing the situation hopeless, but there were at least two who did not agree. Driver **Macdonald**,¹ of E Section, Supply Column, and Sergeant H. Killalea, of the **Australian Corps of Signals**, who had been on line maintenance, sprinted for the only engine in sight, several hundred yards down the track, where it had been abandoned by its Greek crew. Neither knew how to operate a locomotive, but while Stukas and Messerschmitts swept the area with fire, they got this one into motion and brought it back to the trucks. They hitched up twenty-eight trucks laden with petrol, oil and ammunition, severed the coupling with the burning wagons, and drew

the load to a safe distance down the line.

The others began moving shells and mines from the burning, exploding rake, and Macdonald and Killalea came back to assist with this. Throughout the hour's raid, amidst smoke and flames, oil was loaded onto trucks and shells and mines stacked safely away.

'Everything that was saved,' said Ward in reporting the incident to his commanding officer, 'was due to the initiative and courage of these two men, who were the first to attempt salvage.' Macdonald was awarded the MM.

All trucks were loaded by late morning and set off for **Atalandi**. They were trailed on their homeward journey by planes, and 15 miles from **Atalandi** bomb splinters punctured the tire of one truck and severed an oil pipe. The tire was changed in haste and the truck towed back, reaching its destination late in the afternoon.

The day—it was **Hitler's** birthday—had been a stormy one at **Atalandi**, too. Supply Column sprawled on either side of a small blind road near a crossroads. Headquarters was in a wooded, boulder-strewn island area bounded by a curve of the highway. An officers' EPIP tent had been set up, an orderly room RD tent faced the road, there was an RD tent for the CO, and sitting across the road was the cookhouse. Ammunition Company was nearby. This point had been chosen because no maps of the area had been issued, and in the meantime the Column had to be where units could find it. But the enemy had eyes too.

The morning passed quietly. The only incidents of note were the smashing of an effigy of the Virgin Mary at the crossroads by an Ammunition Company truck that missed its turning, and the return of a despatch rider, Driver **High**,² who en route to Headquarters Command NZASC at **Lamia** had been strafed from the air and had his headlamp sheared off by bullets.

After lunch an artillery convoy trundled past the crossroads. A

solitary Stuka came over to have a look, dropped a casual bomb and lollled away. About 1.30 p.m., just as another convoy was moving out to load at **Levadhia**, a swarm of aircraft swept down and opened up with their machine guns. Rather than give away the position of other vehicles camouflaged from sight, the convoy was left where it was and everyone went to ground. Headquarters and Workshops took the worst of three-quarters of an hour's machine-gunning.

A lull followed, and into it innocently drove Driver McDonald, the unit's bugler, with the Headquarters' ration truck. **Major Pryde** and Staff-Sergeant **Mitchell**³ were talking to him when the planes came down again and let go their bombs. **Pryde** and **Mitchell** dived for a sheltering cave that tunnelled under the road. The roof had long since collapsed, and as the first stick of bombs fountained up a few yards away dirt and dust showered down on the deafened occupants, about fifteen in all. **Sergeant Jelley**⁴ received concussion and Driver **Rod**,⁵ who was unable to reach cover, was wounded and later died.⁶

When the attackers drew off, the ration truck was found to be smouldering. Its driver, who had taken shelter under a nearby tree, was wounded. As the fire in the truck took hold the burning canopy was torn off and water flung over the flames. McDonald later died, and his bugle was inscribed and sent to his home at Waimate.

The respite was brief, and soon afterwards the planes returned. As everyone went to earth, bullets came zipping through the trees. The attack continued spasmodically for about three hours. The planes followed each other into the target area, let go their bombs, and, as leisurely as though they were over a practice target, returned and sprayed the area with machine-gun fire. Forty bombs were counted in the Column area. Casualties were three men killed, one wounded and one missing. This last, Driver **Hansen**,⁷ suffered concussion and wandered off into the hills. A long search failed to find him, and he was taken prisoner. Material damage from the raid was light: two vehicles were damaged.

Death and destruction apart, one of the most maddening features of the one-sided air war in **Greece** was the inability of the men on the ground to do much to help themselves. The inevitable frustration found its outlets in various ways, few of them much good except as an escape valve for the emotions. Supply Column's particular emotional outlet was a .55-inch Boys anti-tank rifle mounted on a truck as an anti-aircraft weapon. The theory—quite sound as a theory—was that its armour-piercing bullets could penetrate the armoured cockpits of the enemy planes that shed ordinary bullets like so much rain. Workshops Section contributed the mounting, and the day of the **Atalandi** strafing offered opportunity for its use.

The gun was with an E Section convoy under Lieutenant Tomlinson that left the unit area in the morning before the hate began. Messerschmitts were playing havoc with road traffic, and after taking two hours ten minutes to cover five miles, the convoy turned for home. Setting out again in the afternoon, the convoy was about a mile from the crossroads when the fun started at Column Headquarters. Riflemen, described as being 'somewhat organised', and the Boys anti-tank gun, manned by Corporal **Starkey**⁸ and Driver Le **Compte**,⁹ let fly. The gun engaged planes three times and got away twelve shots before it over-balanced backwards and sent the firer spinning.

After the raid Column Headquarters moved away from the danger area until nightfall, when it returned to move vehicles to a new laager a mile east of the junction.

C and D Sections, which had been on the point of leaving when the attack began, moved out at 3 p.m. On their way to **Levadhia** they were delayed for an hour and a half by 4 RMT troop-carriers travelling in the opposite direction. They reached **Levadhia** in the early hours of 21 April and found that the rake containing rations had been moved some miles south of the station. By 7 a.m. they had loaded thirty tons of hard rations and dispersed near **Atalandi** Pass. Because of continued air activity, they remained here during daylight and reached **Atalandi** about

midnight. The rations were delivered to 10 FSD, four miles north of **Levadhia**, which was taken over on 21 April by Supply Column men of No. 2 Echelon, under Lieutenant McIndoe.

Camouflaged from sight in its new area, Column Headquarters escaped further attention on 21 April. Regularly at 6.50 a.m., 11.50 a.m. and 6.50 p.m., flights of bombers and fighters winged overhead on their way to harass the ports of southern **Greece**. On one of the return flights two fighters skimmed by at tree-top level but did not open fire.

A firm British line faced the Germans, who without attempt at concealment were preparing for their attack. To the west, on the other side of the Pindus mountains, however, Greek resistance was crumbling; caught in a hopeless position, the Greek Army of the Epirus was attempting too late to move back, and on 21 April news reached the British authorities that this army had surrendered. The British flank was now wide open.

Already, however, evacuation was decided on. When General Wavell reached **Athens** on 19 April the beginning of the evacuation was fixed for 28 April, but the collapse of the Greek forces resulted in the date being advanced to the 24th.

Anzac Corps planned that **4 Brigade** would retire to **Kriekouki** and there prepare positions for the final rearguard. While **6 Brigade** covered at **Thermopylae**, **5 Brigade** was to move directly to embarkation points. Sixth Brigade was then to disengage, destroy its guns and withdraw to embarkation points too. Events, however, forced modification of timing, and **5 Brigade** moved south on the same night as **4 Brigade** (the 22nd). Sixth Brigade withdrew on the night of 24–25 April.

The decision to evacuate **Greece** was made known to the troops on the 22nd. Explaining the decision to Supply Column, the Adjutant (Captain **Morris** ¹⁰) said, 'The evacuation will be arranged by the Navy. I think we shall be in good hands.'

The end was in sight, and sentence of death—it was almost that to

NZASC drivers—had to be pronounced on unwanted trucks. Twenty-five of the most roadworthy of No. 2 Echelon three-tonners were selected for troop-carrying, and nineteen three-tonners and 30-cwts were retained to evacuate Supply Column itself.

With ten of the troop-carrying trucks, Tomlinson left for 10 FSD with rations at 6 p.m. on 22 April. After unloading he took his vehicles to a dispersal area near the coast road. He was joined there next day by the remaining fifteen troop-carriers under Second-Lieutenant **Surgenor,¹¹ and twenty-five vehicles from **Petrol Company**. That evening these vehicles came under the command of Major **McGuire**.¹²**

Heavy black clouds hung on the horizon on 23 April, and rolling thunder overlaid the rumbling guns. Inquisitive planes skimmed low over the trees but though there was activity beneath, there was little to be seen from the air. On the off chance, they sent down an occasional hail of bullets. There was an eerie atmosphere of tension, accentuated by rumours that parachute troops had landed in the area. It was a moment of desperation and distrust: sheep in a nearby field appeared to be mustered into formation, and fires were lit. Already, two nights earlier, a Greek who aroused suspicion had been shot.

Throughout the day the Column, in a mood as black as the sky, carried out a systematic course of destruction. The drivers had acquired an affection for their vehicles that had grown over thousands of miles of road and through scores of adventures. They knew every squeak and rattle, and the precise pitch of the engine's note when everything was running well. They knew their vehicles' moods and how to coax them when the going was hard. They had adorned them with the names of their best girls or with monograms or symbols. At least one driver, with tears in his eyes, flatly refused to wreck his vehicle. This was Hyland, driver of 'Flannagan'; he moped away while someone else did the butchery for him.

With reluctant hands the drivers drained away the oil and set the engines running until bearings seized. With sledge hammers they

cracked open engine blocks and stove in radiators; they slashed at tires with axes and soused equipment with acid. Workshops Section tearfully hammered at brand-new equipment, only a week out of the case, and destroyed a pile of gear that had been obtained only a week previously at a Greek base workshops at **Larisa**.

All that could not be destroyed, including personal gear, was buried, and when the work was completed the men each had a rifle, steel helmet, greatcoat and pack, into which were stuffed as many rations and cigarettes as could be carried.

In spite of rumours and scares, the day passed quietly. During the afternoon Captain **Boyce**,¹³ Lieutenant **Rawle**¹⁴ and five other ranks made a reconnaissance of a back road from Malesina and established control points. As a road it was a poor affair—the headlamp of one of the motor cycles was shaken off—but it was a way of escape.

At 6 p.m. 10 FSD closed. Supply Column cleared the area at 7.30, and as dusk came down was jolting and jarring at a cautious pace over the uneven surface. Sidelights in the half light were useless, and about half the distance to the main road had been covered when the fifth vehicle from the rear ran its back wheels into a ditch and slewed at right angles across the road. Using lights, the front part of the convoy went on and at the main road joined the ASC convoy. It took about an hour to free the ditched truck, and the tail-enders reached the main road some miles behind the main convoy.

Traffic packed the main road. Nose-to-tail and with lights burning, trucks were threaded in an endless stream through swarms of refugees, their carts stacked high with belongings, past wrecked and burning trucks, and across bridges where toiling sappers were preparing demolitions. Like an unending glittering snake, the column of trucks droned along the flat at a good clip, but as it wound up into the hill country south of **Thebes** it dropped to a snail's pace.

The New Zealand **Provost Corps** did a commendable job in keeping

traffic in the right direction. Men at each crossroads directed trucks with the aid of lighted signs and arrows set in the road.

Athens, reached in the early morning of 24 April, was a dead city—how dead after its warmth and life a month earlier. Streets were deserted, and nowhere along their empty lengths were there to be found pickets to direct traffic. For several hours trucks roamed aimlessly down silent streets until at last Movement Control was located at Force Headquarters in the Hotel Acropole. After some delay in mustering wandering transport part of the Column's convoy was led to a dispersal area on the plain of **Marathon**, eight or ten miles from C Beach at **Porto Rafti**. Unable to find the leading section of the convoy, Boyce took the remaining Column trucks to Kamponia. He was directed by Movement Control to embark that night at D Beach.

Fifth Brigade, too, was ready to embark. Throughout this day its men had lain concealed within sight of the sea, and that night, under the cover of the same moonless darkness that was concealing the withdrawal of **6 Brigade** from **Thermopylae**, they converged on the beaches.

Beneath the trees the Supply Column men had a sing-song while waiting for the order to start for the beach.

In Morris's field notebook the orders looked like this:

“D” Beach Starting 8 p.m.

Drivers to remain with vehicles

embarking takes place 1 hr after dark

90% 3500 approx tonight

Beach cont. off for Aus Maj Sheppard

All ranks carry three days rations

in their pockets

Not to go to Refini [[Rafina](#)]

25 men in each veh.

remaining veh. dest.

Body arrangements *not* unit

Trucks took the men to within two miles of [Porto Rafti](#), and as they trudged on towards the beach they could hear behind them the clatter of the last vehicles being destroyed. Thoroughly exhausted—the men had spent most of the campaign in their trucks and were anything but fit—they reached a feature overlooking the [Aegean Sea](#). Here a naval officer was directing troops and urging haste. From one of the evacuation ships standing off shore a signal lamp was winking. On shore the embarkation officers kept up a running description of the progress being made.

The men felt sand under their feet; it was now about 8 p.m. Ahead of them stretched a dark queue of the thousands who had been waiting for interminable hours to be taken off by the landing craft running a shuttle service between shore and the ships.

There was no end to time. Every so often the line of men, exhausted from tense days, sleepless nights and long journeys, shuffled forward a few yards. Intermittently the cool voice of a naval officer said, ‘Keep together in line. There must be no smoking. Troops will not lie down.’ To have lain down would have induced the slumber of fatigue that would have dislocated the evacuation.

It was about seven hours before the last of the queue in front of Supply Column men melted away and the lapping sea lay before them. The night was nearly gone. At 3 a.m., when the operation was about to end, the first Column men scrambled into landing craft, the engines

gave a surge of power and the water creamed up behind as the boats faded away into the darkness. Left on the beach were about 500 New Zealanders, half of them Supply Column men. The deadline had been reached, and to be clear of enemy aircraft before daylight the ships could wait no longer. Captain Morris and Sergeant-Major Pullen could have gone in a launch in which two seats had been reserved for them, but preferred to remain on shore with the men. Morris was the senior NZASC officer present.

A naval officer said, 'Attention everybody. It is too late to take any more off tonight, so the rest of you will disperse and sleep. Be here tomorrow night and the Navy will try to take you off. Gentlemen, I am sorry. Good luck to you all.' Then, almost before the despair of this announcement had taken effect, his voice came again, 'Remain where you are.' The faint throb of a motor came in from the sea, and as the men stared into the darkness a tank landing craft took shape and bunted inshore. The queue moved forward and the men groped their way into the black depths of the craft. Slowly they packed in till it was full; there was still a crowd on the beach. Those on board compressed themselves further into the boat, and the remaining men came on. The barge pulled itself clear of the sand and moved away from the deserted beach.

But though these men were off [Greece](#), they were a long way from rescue. The Navy was already heading for the open sea.

Crowded into the thick atmosphere of diesel fumes and unwashed bodies, the 500 men in the pitching tank landing craft, held awkwardly upright by their pressing neighbours, consoled themselves that their destination could not be far away. Heavily overloaded, the craft rose sluggishly to each wave and slapped sickeningly with racing propeller into each trough. At every cant of the ship the compressed mass of men leaned on each other; around their feet bilge water lapped and gurgled. Many men, dressed still in their greatcoats and carrying their packs, slept as they stood. Others, less fortunate, were seasick.

The landing craft continued to labour interminably through the heaving sea. Then from the hatch above Captain Tui Love,¹⁶ of the **Maori Battalion**, called for attention. ‘The warships have gone and you are being taken to **Kea Island**,’ his voice said through the darkness. ‘It is the best the Navy can do. When you reach your destination you will disperse but remain on call in case the Navy can arrange to pick you up. Otherwise you must find your own way to **Crete**. One last word: you must expect aerial attacks and be prepared to repulse landing parties.’

There was a general grumble of discontent from various parts of the barge, and a member of the **Pay Corps**, speaking in a loud, high-pitched, nervous voice, began to curse the whole Army, Navy and Air Force. Fearing panic, Pullen flashed his torch on the man and told him to ‘Shut up’. Nothing more was said.

Kea Island lay 15 miles from the Greek coast, but the craft took four hours to make the journey, and in the welcome sunlight of 25 April—twenty-six years after the **Gallipoli** landing on a beach not so very distant—the men waded ashore. On the beach stood several islanders, including small children holding hands. Others, fearing that this was a German raiding party, had fled but soon returned.

In compliance with orders, the men dispersed into olive groves to sleep, and within half an hour the only outward sign of activity was the tank landing craft putting out from the bay.

Kea was typical of the many picturesque islands scattered across the **Aegean Sea**, extending Greek territory almost to **Turkey**. Behind the tumbledown fishing village, with its cobbled jetty and anchored caiques, the green hills rose steeply. Dotted here and there were white houses and an occasional church. Like so many parts of **Greece** where these men had been, it had an idyllic tranquillity that until it was sharply shattered by the **Luftwaffe** seemed a stubborn denial of reality.

While the men rested, the senior representative from each of the eleven groups attended an officers' conference called by Captain Love.

Infantry, engineers, NZASC and medical were the main groups, the largest, under Morris, being Supply Column. Love was selected as OC troops.

A stocktaking showed that resources were low. The only food was the few biscuits and tins of bully beef the men had in their packs, and the islanders, themselves on a frugal diet, could not for too long support their uninvited though not unwelcome guests. Jacobs was instructed to use regimental funds brought from **Greece to secure what food he could.**

Ammunition was down to ten rounds a rifle. The officers resolved that in the event of invasion, and in the absence of any evacuation arrangements, the small force was to resist to the limit of its resources, and after that there was no alternative but to give up.

A further problem was the presence of medical men, who of course were non-combatant. Arrangements were made to put them aboard a steamer bound for **Turkey, which was anchored in the harbour. They were lightered out, but when they were 300 yards from the ship a shot skipped across their bows. With understandable discretion they turned back to shore, and it was later found that the ship's captain had decided that whether they be combatant or non-combatant, he wanted nothing to do with soldiers. The ship was, in any case, already overcrowded. As it turned out it was a fortunate twist of fortune. The ship was later sunk and all those on board were lost.**

Several officers, Love among them, took up quarters in a large, square, white building on the waterfront formerly used by the Danish ambassador as a holiday residence. A quarter of a mile along the road Sergeant-Major Pullen, Sergeants **Balkind ¹⁷ and **Sargent**, ¹⁸ and Lance-Corporal **Duke** ¹⁹ set up another section of Headquarters under a culvert where the road began to climb into the hills. This was a comfortable nook and a good administrative centre—if only there had been something to administer. The only misfortune was the presence of a dead cat.**

Jacobs, meanwhile, was going about his task of finding food.

Collecting several NCOs from No. 1 Echelon supply details, the entire strength of which was on the island, he went to a nearby village and, after making himself understood with difficulty, bought a small supply of fresh vegetables, which included lettuces, onions and radishes. He also bought a baker's meagre supply of black bread and arranged for him to bake more later in the day. More bread was found to be available at a village four miles away in the hills. A party was despatched, but on arrival found that the bread had already been sent down on donkeys; bush telegraph had been well ahead of them.

From under a tall hedge by a goat track, supply details distributed the food. There was insufficient to go around, and the two headquarters groups on the waterfront and under the culvert made do with a redolent meal of spring onions and garlic from a nearby garden patch. Other men scoured about for food, one or two finding chickens.

The future food situation was precarious. The island's flour resources were low, and though villagers promised to search the island for more, there was a limit to what could be found.

Several times during that day the bell of St. Agrystrakos church tolled a warning as Messerschmitts swooped down over the island and swept the valleys with machine-gun fire and dropped bombs in the harbour. At each alarm the islanders fled and the New Zealanders concealed themselves.

By evening there was still no clue as to how a rescue could be made, and various schemes for escape were hatched. The men were told that if the Navy could not take them off they would have to make their own way to [Crete](#) in whatever boats were available. Morris and Rawle had befriended the Greek harbourmaster, Spiros Bogdanos, who would have been useful in securing a small craft for the Aegean crossing. [Crete](#) and [Turkey](#) were about equidistant, though [Turkey](#) had advantages: it could be reached by island-hopping and the route was less likely to be watched by Germans. Evacuation, however, was still a reasonable expectation

and no action was taken.

Next day (the 26th) a bullock was bought for 8000 drachmae (£16) and slaughtered, but was never eaten. The carcass was being cooked around noon when a naval lieutenant in white shirt and shorts came panting over the island with the news that the men would be evacuated by a ship that would leave the other side of the island at 8 p.m. that day. It was agreed that the signal for assembly would be three shots from Morris's pistol at 2 p.m.

The six or seven miles to the other side of the island was considered by the natives to be arduous, and surplus gear was dumped. Morris still had with him a suede-covered portable gramophone that he had bought at [Athens](#) and which one of the men had dutifully carried to Kea. This, he decided, must go, and he selected as its recipient a pretty 18-year-old Greek girl who was a nurse in an [Athens](#) hospital. She bristled with suspicion when he attempted to press the gift on her, but with the aid of the village barber he made her understand what it was all about. Her mother insisted on paying for it with four eggs and a hatful of peanuts.

Four eggs in this situation were precious, and Morris approached 'a seedy looking individual' whom he took to be a fisherman, and asked him to tell him where he might cook them. The 'fisherman', in a cultured English voice, told him a sailor standing by a brazier on the deck of 'that fishing smack' would cook them for him. Taken aback, but by now ready to accept almost anything as possible, Morris went aboard and, gesticulating to the sailor by the brazier, said, 'Agfa—you cook please.' The reply, in broad Cockney, was that he would be pleased to, for the price of one egg.

Morris might have been excused if all sense of reality left him, for he found he was on board a ship that had all the qualifications of fiction. The 'fisherman' was a naval officer assisting in the evacuation of [Greece](#). The fishing-smack was a powerfully engined ship; in a huge radio compartment into which Morris had a glimpse, a radio transmitter was in constant communication with the War Office.

Morris fired his pistol at 2 p.m., and after assembling at the church the men moved off in groups of twenty at two-minute intervals under an officer or NCO. Some were missing, but time was too short to wait until they could be found.

For three miles the road followed the coastal shelf. Near a placid inlet, where a caique lay anchored, the hills came down to the sea and the track wound up into the mountains. The pace slackened and the groups began to string out. As the faster climbers of each group overtook the stragglers of the group ahead, a continuous line of men was formed plodding in the broiling sun up the twisting track. As aircraft zoomed overhead the men flattened themselves under cover, and the planes passed without seeing them. These rests were welcome, but it required a stern effort to set legs moving again on the seemingly unending climb. Each crest was an illusion; beyond always lay another. Some lightened their loads by throwing away what they could.

As the peak was breasted the pace became rapid. At the risk of wrenched ankles, the now straggling line made good time down the rough track. There was no time to lose. At 7.50 p.m., ten minutes from the deadline, the tail of the column was still making its way down the mountain, and valuable minutes were lost taking cover when aircraft came over. These men could see the waiting landing craft, the same that had brought them to the island, barely discernible beneath the evening shadow of the sheer bluffs. At last steep steps led down into a cove, and a goat track to a rocky area and the 12-inch board that was the gangplank of the barge. There were a few who had a swim before they were dragged, dripping and blasphemous, aboard the landing craft.

At the tail of the column came a New Zealand doctor, De Clive [Lowe](#),²⁰ leading a donkey laden to capacity with most of the effects discarded by the men on the mountain, and much of what had been cast aside could be reclaimed.

There was a brief alarm when a German plane skimmed across the entrance of the cove about 100 feet from the water, but it went by

without seeing the ship, and the craft moved away from the blurred outline of the rugged coast. Ten members of the Supply Column who were missing when the trek started had still not arrived.

As the craft headed for the open sea a watch was kept for floating mines. For some hours it churned through the Aegean. Then its engines were shut off and it lay for a while in the darkness, surging in the lapping water. The distant sound of surf could be heard. A light winked in the void. Minutes passed, and a ship took shape; it was the trooper *Salween*. The Navy, as usual, was in a hurry, and minutes were precious. A swell was lifting the two vessels and joggling them now together, now apart, and every attempt to tie them together failed. A few men scrambled up a rope ladder, but at the end of an hour the landing craft had to pull away with most of the men still aboard.

The craft next picked up the low-decked flak ship HMS *Carlisle*, and the Kea men were quickly put aboard. Among the ship's passengers they found two Greek girls in New Zealand uniforms.

Fourteen times aircraft attacked the convoy on its way to *Crete*. On board the *Carlisle* New Zealanders helped to man the anti-aircraft guns, and very pleased about it they felt, particularly when a Junkers 88 tumbled into the sea. Sitting on the deck the Maoris let go their anger by firing skywards with everything at their disposal: rifles, Brens and even pistols. Says one passenger: 'A solid hail of lead seemed to be flying heavenwards.'

The *Salween*, with the lucky few, went on to *Egypt*. The *Carlisle* put into *Suda Bay, Crete*, at 7 p.m. that day, and the men disembarked.

While the *Carlisle* was steaming towards *Crete*, there remained on Kea several men to whom the future seemed to hold little chance of escape. Four of the ten left behind were taken off the same night; the remaining six, who had set off in pursuit of the main party, reached the top of the island in time to see the landing craft pulling away.

Three of those who were left, Drivers *Baldwin*,²¹ *Williams*²² and

Teague, ²³ were taken off that night by the destroyer *Nubian*, and after running the gauntlet of German aircraft returned to *Egypt*.

Another taken off that night was Driver *Bradshaw*, ²⁴ whose linguistic abilities were almost the cause of his downfall. Greek was among the languages he had mastered, and when most of the men were setting off for the other side of the island he was still talking with villagers. He, too, was rescued by a destroyer.

Six others, including Drivers *McArthur*, ²⁵ *Palmer*, ²⁶ *Broadbent* ²⁷ and *Honniwell*, ²⁸ were less fortunate. They had taken up their quarters in caves on the second day on the island. At midday they ate their slender ration of bully beef and stretched out to sleep.

‘Suddenly I woke to what I thought was the sound of three shots,’ writes Broadbent. ‘Some of the others were already awake, but as they appeared to have heard nothing I decided I must have been dreaming, and let the matter drop.’

The rest of the afternoon was whiled away at poker and pontoon. About 5 p.m. a Greek boy came to the mouth of the cave but failed to make himself understood. He went away and returned in a few minutes with an old man, who began gesticulating frantically in the direction of the mountains and repeating some such words as ‘*Tria stratiosis*’.

It was gathered that the others had gone, and gathering up their equipment, the six New Zealanders followed this energetic old man along the coast and up the mountain track. As they reached the peak at dusk they heard what they took to be a German plane. Then in the bay far below they saw the smudged outline of what was obviously the landing craft pulling out to sea.

On the point of exhaustion, the men rested for a while before they returned the way they had come. They reached the inlet at the base of the mountain about midnight, ignorant of the fact that again they were missing rescue by a destroyer by a narrow margin, and settled down

thankfully in the church by the sea to sleep. They were roused at the chilly hour of 4 a.m., and led by their Greek friend, skirted the bay in darkness. The seizing of the caique anchored off shore was mooted, but their guide shook his head. They were given food at a farmhouse, and reached the port in daylight. A medium-sized Turkish ship was anchored on the far side of the harbour, and two French civilians at the village, one a journalist, said they were sailing on her for **Turkey**. The six New Zealanders decided to follow suit unless something better turned up that day. Like the earlier ship, this one also was later sunk.

During the morning they bought bread and found there was meat to be had that had been paid for by Jacobs. After their meal they went to a hotel and slept until midday. An hour later two medium-sized caiques came into the harbour and tied up at the jetty. From one stepped the trim figure of a British naval officer. He greeted the New Zealanders' recital of woes with only casual interest, but assured them that they could go with him when he sailed in about three hours' time. There were, he said, already about sixteen New Zealanders in the hold.

Asking the New Zealanders to carry two wounded Greeks up to the village, he went off for some sleep. At sailing time—4 p.m.—the six men were told to go below and stay there. Enemy attacks were likely if it was suspected there were troops on board.

There were fifteen New Zealand sappers and a Greek officer in the hold, and scattered about was a quantity of ammunition, hand grenades and TNT. In the centre was a keg of rum, and watching over it an inebriated sapper. The caique, he said cheerfully, hadn't a hope of getting through. The beach it was going to was already in German hands. As the caique chugged slowly towards the open sea, the rum went the rounds, and everyone began to feel better.

The first three-quarters of an hour passed peacefully. Then a sapper who was peering through a hatch said tersely, 'German planes coming', and as the men flattened themselves among the cargo of explosives, three planes dived. They roared low, spattered the ship with bullets, and

passed on. Half an hour later four fighters came down and, skimming just above the surface, poured machine-gun and cannon fire into the ship. The bullets plopped against the stout timbers, and then these planes, too, went on their way. As the sound of their motors died away and the men in the hold picked themselves up, one of them emerged from beneath boxes he had piled on himself. Questioned by a sapper, he pleaded ignorance on their contents. 'Just grenades,' said the sapper. The laughter lifted the tension.

Twice more aircraft swooped down and sprayed the ship from sea level before land was sighted about dusk. More stragglers were picked up from the mainland, and early during the night the caique met the cruiser *Kimberley* at a rendezvous at sea. **Crete** was reached next morning (28 April).

While Supply Column men were making their devious ways from **Porto Rafti** to **Crete**, the melancholy business of **Greece** was drawing to a close. It was a creditable ending, in the best traditions of orderly withdrawal.

With the complete artillery of the Division thundering behind it, **6 Brigade** met determined attacks at **Thermopylae** and hung on to its positions in the face of severe mortaring, bombing and tank attacks. The brigade withdrew on the night of 24-25 April through **4 Brigade** which, with Australian artillery and anti-tank guns, was screening the evacuation with a line at **Thebes**. To relieve the strain on the evacuation beaches near **Athens**, **6 Brigade** crossed the **Corinth Canal** one jump ahead of the German paratroopers, and shedding as it went trucks that had given up the ghost, made its way to ports in **the Peloponnese**.

As the Germans pressed south the situation became critical, and into this confusion were precipitated a number of stragglers from Supply Column. Sixth Brigade slipped across the canal on the night of 25-26 April. At first light next day the Germans began a furious air attack on the canal area, culminating in an airborne landing that failed in its object of securing undamaged the bridge—blown up at the height of the

attack after splendid efforts by individuals from British units, among them two men from 2 Section, **6 Field Company**. The actual cause of the explosions remains a matter for conjecture.

At **Thebes**, meanwhile, **4 Brigade** and the Australian guns were hitting hard at a surprised enemy, whose reconnaissance had failed to reveal the existence of the rearguard line. When the link with **the Peloponnese** was cut, however, **4 Brigade** was left in a tight corner and was evacuated from **Porto Rafti**.

In **the Peloponnese** the final evacuations were carried out at the three ports of **Navplion**, **Monemvasia** and **Kalamata** in a tense atmosphere and with some disappointments. In addition to the paratroopers who had come down at the **Corinth Canal**, a second German force, thrusting down from the east, had crossed to **the Peloponnese** at **Patrai**. As the Germans began to squeeze up the last part of British-occupied **Greece**, each minute at the evacuation beaches became vital, and at **Kalamata** delay turned certain rescue into bitter disappointment for 7000 men, among them some from **Supply Column**.

At this point the evacuation of **Greece** disintegrated into individual escapes, and here again **Supply Column** men were among those who, by whatever means they could, cleared the Greek mainland under the eyes of the vigilant **Luftwaffe** and patrolling launches.

The last organised group of **Supply Column** on **Greece** was that which had been put under the command of Major McGuire to help bring out **6 Brigade**. This brigade was embussed on **NZASC** transport during the evening of 24 April—just about the time that the rest of **Supply Column** was joining the embarkation queue at **Porto Rafti**—and the trucks were away by 11.15 p.m. Almost blind with only the meagre glimmer from sidelights, drivers smashed dusty windscreens, but even so bumpers, mudguards and lights suffered as trucks crashed together. Moving back through **4 Brigade's** positions, the convoy halted at dawn and dispersed under cover. Tomlinson found at this halt that the tray of his 15-cwt was littered with grenades that had tumbled from their container. Still

with him was his inseparable companion **Mitzo**, a St. Bernard he had bought as a month-old puppy on 2 April for 200 drachmae (13s.). The dog was a well-known personality in the Division until accidentally shot a year later at **Baalbek** in **Syria**.

The convoy moved on at 6 p.m., rumbled across the **Corinth** bridge and twisted through burning **Corinth** itself. Trucks now were being discarded as they broke down. As each was jettisoned, its passengers piled out and swung themselves aboard the next. Stragglers, too, were grasping at tailboards, and soon some trucks were stern down under double loads. Straining, overheated engines were drawing up petrol at the rate of a gallon every three or four miles.

There was little cover to be found at dawn on the 26th, and trucks dispersed as best they could. The planes came down with joyful gusto and kept up their pounding all day. South again that night, and at daylight dispersal. Tomlinson found that his ten trucks were reduced to six, all heavily overloaded.

During 27 April **6 Brigade** formed positions around **Tripolis**. The 26th Battalion moved out about midday, but the other two battalions remained. Tomlinson went off to a nearby village to see if he could get any of the famous Greek brown bread for the men, who were heartily sick of army biscuits. He was gladly given what he believed was the village's last loaf and was not permitted to pay for it, in spite of his protests. He encountered here a number of Greek officers, including a general, in a great state of alarm. They had apparently deserted their troops and begged Tomlinson to arrange for their evacuation.

The remainder of **6 Brigade** pulled out at 9 p.m. and at dawn were a few miles from **Monemvasia**. Throughout the 28th the infantry, concealed from searching planes, was prepared to meet any ground attacks. That night trucks moved off in groups. At **Monemvasia**, when troops had debussed, the empty vehicles were toppled over a cliff into the sea or otherwise destroyed, and the remaining distance was covered on foot. **Mitzo** alone was privileged; he was carried by his master.

The first men who crunched down on to the sands searched the night for the rescue ships. Nothing stirred on the flat calm sea, and for hours as the crowd grew they watched and waited and listened, feeling every precious minute slip away. At last, silent shadows in the darkness, the destroyers moved in. There were more delays and heartbreaking uncertainties, and a probability that because there were not enough small craft one battalion would have to wait another day, but as more boats were gathered up and put into service and more ships arrived with additional landing craft, the operation gathered pace. The last boat, in which were the admiral and **Major-General Freyberg**, ran alongside HMS *Ajax* at 4 a.m.

As he came aboard HMS *Isis* each man was given a steaming hot mug of cocoa—a miraculous sustainer for morale and warmth for the dead-tired. To provide it the Navy used its precious fresh water reserves. Even **Mitzo**, with his master on the *Isis*, was capably cared for. At **Crete** men were transferred to the *Thurland Castle*, and they reached **Port Said** on the morning of 2 May.

Not far behind **6 Brigade** across the **Corinth Canal** were three Supply Column men, Drivers **Swale**,²⁹ **Hetherington**³⁰ and **Hay**,³¹ but the few hours made the world of difference to their comfort. Involved in a motorcycle accident when the unit first arrived in **Athens**, Swale spent three weeks in hospital and was still at a New Zealand transit camp near **Piraeus** when the evacuation order was given. He went with British troops to the evacuation port of **Megara**, between **Athens** and **Corinth**, arriving there on the morning of 25 April. After lying up all day he joined up that evening with Hay, but after a long walk the two reached the evacuation beach at 2 a.m., only to find that no more troops were being taken from it. They were told to go to **Navplion**. Hetherington joined them at the beach.

At dawn the three men decided to try to repair one of the destroyed trucks in the area. They found one still in good condition, and picking up a load of men drove down the road to **Corinth**, along which others of

the beach party were straggling. They had crossed the **Corinth** bridge and were still north of the town when the German blitz burst around them. First silencing the protecting Bofors, the bombers came over in droves, rocking the earth with their bombs. Fighters swept low and raked the area with machine guns and cannons. Then from their hiding places the men saw parachutes blossoming in the sky as with textbook precision the Germans developed their airborne attack.

None of these troops dropped near the Supply Column men, but when the Germans began to deploy it was clearly time to leave. As paratroopers approached, they made a dash for their truck, a few yards away, and set off to the south. They raced through **Corinth**, flattened by the air bombardment, and drove on to the south-west. They passed through **6 Brigade's** defensive positions at **Argos** and went on to **Navplion**. They found evacuation ships either sunk or burning in the harbour, and returned to **Argos**. Next day (the 27th) they went to **Kalamata**, where they were taken on a destroyer which went direct to **Egypt**. Bombers attacked the convoy and two ships were sunk.

Not so fortunate were Drivers **Gibson**,³² **Wright**³³ and **Fraser**,³⁴ who were among the 7000 left at **Kalamata** the following night (28-29 April). Gibson was another who had been sent to hospital when the unit first reached **Greece**, and was at **Piraeus** when the evacuation order was given. The three men travelled with a convoy across the **Corinth Canal** and south through **the Peloponnese**. After encountering air raids and a resultant traffic block in the **Corinth Pass**, they reached an area north of **Kalamata** at nightfall on 28 April. With many other New Zealanders they converged on **Kalamata**, to which the cruisers *Phoebe* and *Perth* and six destroyers had been sent to make the last evacuation from **Greece**.

Many who were evacuated from **Greece** could almost feel the breath of their pursuers on their necks; the men at **Kalamata** on this night found the Germans not merely behind them but in front of them too. The German forces that had crossed the Gulf of **Corinth** at Patrai moved on to **Kalamata** via Megalopolis. They penetrated into **Kalamata** with

light forces, and when the ships arrived at 9 p.m. a spirited battle was in progress for possession of the jetties. Owing to an error in judgment all ships except *Hero* withdrew. Late that night three other destroyers arrived, but due largely to the earlier capture of the Naval Beach Officer and his staff no ships came to the quays and only a handful of men were evacuated by the ships' boats.

The last organised body of New Zealanders in **Greece** turned their backs on the sea and found refuge where they could. The three Supply Column men went up into the hills, returning next day. They repaired a semi-demolished truck and, picking up other New Zealanders, drove into **Kalamata**. While Fraser and Wright stayed with the truck, the others went into an orchard and were peacefully peeling oranges by the roadside when a German armoured car went by at high speed. Believing it to be a captured one, the New Zealanders ignored it, but at that moment four more came into view. One opened up with a machine gun, killing or wounding four of the eight on the roadside. The two with the truck were taken prisoner.

Gibson, and a Maori, Private **Atta**,³⁵ reached safety by squirming through a culvert under the road and making back into the hills. From here they could look down on the final battle and the surrender next day of the exhausted New Zealanders. They made their way down the coast, and on the night of 1 May fell in with a group of nine New Zealanders who intended sailing that night in an 18-foot boat. There was room for two men but a shortage of food and water.

On a calm, still night, they rowed steadily down the coast; along the shore the fires of German bivouacs glimmered. They put into shore at first light, hid the boat and took refuge in a house. In this fashion they reached the tip of **the Peloponnese** in three days. Their next objective was Kithira Island, about 25 miles south-west of the mainland.

'We were ready to sail just before dusk,' writes Gibson, 'when a Greek caique pursued by a German launch appeared in the inlet. Fortunately for us the chase continued out of sight. We waited some time before

setting sail.'

They reached Kithira early next morning and were informed that the Germans had not yet landed there. They went out again early in the afternoon and when about two miles off shore were closely inspected by a low-flying Messerschmitt. They apparently passed as civilians for the aircraft turned away. Three hours later they pulled in at the tip of the island for a spell. An English-speaking Greek volunteered to inquire whether there was any planned evacuation from the island, but returned with the alarming news that the Germans had landed the previous evening and patrols were out in search of stragglers.

In spite of this information, the New Zealanders decided that the safest course was to wait until dusk before resuming their voyage. Again fortunate, they were on the point of leaving when a rowing boat with a German launch in pursuit came into view. The launch was seen to pull alongside the boat, then darkness concealed the scene.

Still unobserved they reached the open sea and the next morning were at Antikithira, 26 miles away. Greek soldiers gave them food, and at nightfall they set out for **Crete**, 30 miles to the south-east. Guided by anti-aircraft fire over **Suda Bay** and hurried along by a strong following wind, they reached **Crete** at 9 a.m. next day (14 May), twelve days after they had set out from **Kalamata**.

Another of those left high and dry in **Kalamata** was Corporal **Begg**,³⁶ who was in hospital at **Athens** when the withdrawal from **Greece** was ordered. When the German forces came into **Kalamata** on 29 April Begg was hiding beneath trees with a number of other New Zealanders from various units. About midday they heard a car pull up on the road nearby. A sergeant and a corporal who went to investigate found it to be a German staff car in which was a blue-uniformed officer, revolver in hand. He called on the New Zealanders to surrender, but with an automatic stuttering behind them, they wheeled and dived back under cover like rabbits. The whole group took to their heels, racing madly across vineyards and open fields and bursting through cactus hedges

with little attention to the jagged thorns. When they paused for a rest, a count showed there were now twenty-two of them, including three officers.

Crawling through ditches, sneaking beside hedges to evade the constantly patrolling aircraft, and finally wading a waist-deep swamp, they made their way to the coast about a mile from **Kalamata**. Not far away the guns were hammering, and Greeks told them that the Germans were in the town. Civilians guided them to a nearby village, where they acquired two small boats and a larger one. Begg was in the larger one.

The plan was for the three boats to keep within hailing distance of one another, with the largest leading. With little wind to aid it, however, this boat was left behind by the other two and contact was lost in the mist.

Wielding cumbersome oars with difficulty, those in the large boat made tedious progress. About 3 a.m. they heard what sounded like turbines, and shielding their torch with a steel helmet they flashed an SOS. Their signals were either not seen or ignored.

Contact with the other boats was regained at dawn, and the three put into the shore again. Utterly exhausted, they slept until the roar of low-flying aircraft disturbed them. Well-meaning Greeks brought food and water, but their attentions were an embarrassment for they were likely to attract the interest of German troops who passed their shelter throughout the day.

Stocked with food and water and helped along by a slight breeze, they pushed off that evening, navigating towards **Crete** by using the stars. Again the large boat was left behind. At dawn it was decided to make for an island some distance off. German aircraft passed continuously but ignored them. At midday the wind dropped entirely, and again the men took up the heavy oars and dragged the boat towards the island. Like a mirage, the island never seemed to come closer, and when night came the boat was still far out on the empty sea.

They toiled on wearily. Attempts to snatch a little sleep between turns at rowing were frustrated by a leak that demanded the energies of every spare man to keep the boat bailed out.

About midnight they were jerked back from nodding fatigue by the sound of throbbing engines. Peering through the darkness they could make out the shapes of three warships approaching. Again they tapped out an SOS with their torch, and the ships began to circle and come in closer. An English voice was heard, and shortly afterwards they were scrambling up rope ladders put down by the nearest ship. They were taken direct to **Egypt.**

And so it was that in one way or another almost every man of Supply Column came out of **Greece; only eleven failed. Some of these were caught when the Germans descended on **Corinth** on 26 April. Others fell into German hands through various misfortunes during the scramble of the evacuation.**

Otherwise casualties were light and give a guide to the amount of bombardment by high explosive that men can endure almost with immunity. Three were killed, two died of wounds, and five (including one of those captured) were wounded and survived.

¹ **Dvr J. G. Macdonald, MM; born Oamaru, 18 Jun 1909; clerk; killed in action May 1941.**

² **Dvr K. High; born England, 14 Jan 1916; lorry driver.**

³ **S-Sgt J. A. Mitchell; Christchurch; born Christchurch, 21 Jan 1907; fruiterer.**

⁴ **Sgt J. Jelley; born NZ, 20 Jan 1904; lorry driver; died while p.w. 15 Aug 1941.**

⁵ **Dvr J. W. Rod; born NZ, 5 Jul 1914; tailor; died of wounds 20**

Apr 1941.

⁶ Sup Coln's first fatal casualty in Greece was Dvr J. W. F. Welsh, killed on 18 Apr 1941.

⁷ Dvr W. A. A. Hansen; Fairlie; born NZ, 9 Oct 1918; labourer; p.w. 29 Apr 1941.

⁸ Cpl S. Starkey; Outram; born Dunedin, 31 Jul 1911; carpenter; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

⁹ Dvr D. E. Le Compte; Gisborne; born Christchurch, 2 Aug 1918; farmhand; wounded 30 May 1941; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

¹⁰ Maj J. R. Morris, m.i.d.; Dunedin; born England, 8 Dec 1911; salesman.

¹¹ Capt G. R. Surgenor, m.i.d.; Auckland; born NZ, 4 Mar 1913; storeman.

¹² Lt-Col W. A. T. McGuire, ED, m.i.d.; Auckland; born NZ, 22 Dec 1905; police officer and motor engineer; OC Amn Coy Oct 1939-Oct 1941; OC NZ Base ASC 1941-44.

¹³ Capt A. H. Boyce, ED; Seddon; born Blenheim, 8 May 1905; farmer; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

¹⁴ Maj R. E. Rawle, MC; Wellington; born Wellington, 2 Aug 1911; civil servant; OC Sup Coy 18 Apr 1944-29 Nov 1945; wounded 25 May 1941.

¹⁵ Lt-Col G. F. Bertrand, OBE, ED; New Plymouth; born Urenui, 9 Feb 1891; school teacher; 1 Bn Wgtn Regt 1914-19 (OC 1 HB Coy 1918; wounded three times); 2 i/c 28 (Maori) Bn Nov 1939-Oct 1941; CO 2 Maori Bn and Maori Trg Unit (in NZ) Apr 1942-Oct 1944.

- 16 Lt-Col E. Te W. Love, m.i.d.; born Picton, 18 May 1905; interpreter; CO 28 (Maori) Bn May–Jul 1942; died of wounds 12 Jul 1942.**
- 17 WO II I. H. Balkind; Auckland; born Melbourne, 14 Feb 1905; mechanic.**
- 18 Sgt F. W. Sargent; born NZ, 7 Jul 1915; law student and solicitor's clerk.**
- 19 Capt W. S. Duke; Dunedin; born Dunedin, 28 Jan 1913; butcher; p.w. 27 Nov 1941.**
- 20 Maj S. G. De Clive Lowe, m.i.d.; England; born NZ, 27 Feb 1904; medical practitioner; medical officer 5 Fd Amb Mar–May 1941; p.w. May 1941.**
- 21 Cpl R. A. Baldwin; Christchurch; born Christchurch, 4 Jun 1914; woolclasser.**
- 22 Dvr T. H. Williams; born NZ, 19 Nov 1904; insurance agent.**
- 23 Dvr A. J. Teague; Wellington; born Stratford, 8 Jan 1906; carrier.**
- 24 L-Cpl J. S. Bradshaw; Napier; born England, 9 Jun 1921; student.**
- 25 Dvr A. W. McArthur; born NZ, 26 Dec 1919; kiln-burner.**
- 26 Dvr L. Palmer; Reefton; born Invercargill, 20 Jan 1918; bricklayer.**
- 27 Sgt H. F. Broadbent; born England, 27 Jul 1914; school**

teacher.

²⁸ Dvr C. V. Honniwell; Timaru; born NZ, 7 Nov 1905; lorry driver

²⁹ Sgt A. T. Swale; Tuatapere; born Bush Siding, Invercargill, 20 Apr 1918; sawmill worker.

³⁰ Dvr J. Hetherington; born England, 4 Jan 1907; plumber.

³¹ Dvr W. Hay; born NZ, 16 Dec 1915; farm labourer.

³² Dvr M. R. Gibson; Hanmer; born Christchurch, 2 Feb 1920; labourer.

³³ Dvr F. T. Wright; Auckland; born NZ, 13 Oct 1917; truck driver; p.w. 29 Apr 1941.

³⁴ Dvr A. Fraser; born Waipori, 15 Aug 1904; grocer; p.w. 29 Apr 1941.

³⁵ Pte C. Atta; born NZ, 26 Oct 1913; farmer; p.w. 1 Jun 1941; died 26 Nov 1947.

³⁶ L-Sgt J. W. Begg; born Dunedin, 4 May 1918; salesman.

SUPPLY COMPANY

CHAPTER 6 – CRETE

CHAPTER 6

Crete

IN a sense **Greece** was a prelude—or perhaps the battle around the outer walls before the withdrawal to the citadel, **Crete**. Here, in this inner keep, all men stood to their arms. Drivers without trucks, artillerymen without guns, cavalrymen without tanks fell in beside the infantrymen, and with rifle and bayonet prepared to face the enemy's airborne attack.

A small section of the Supply Column men who stayed on **Crete** continued supply work, but most of them joined the ranks of the fighting men, and in the final defence of **Galatas** made a stand that provides the highlight of this history.

With **Greece** in German hands, **Crete** became a shield for General Wavell as he dealt with the complexities of **Middle East** problems: a newcomer to the desert, Rommel had in a few days swallowed up most of Wavell's hard-won gains in **Cyrenaica** and now stood on the Egyptian frontier; there was a revolt in **Iraq** to be put down; and in **Syria** German infiltration made action imperative. A British division was to be sent to defend **Crete** and the disorganised Australians and New Zealanders taken back to **Egypt**, but the task of escorting large convoys was beyond the overworked British Navy, and the Anzacs stayed.

From 25 April until 1 May ships streamed back and forth between **Crete** and the evacuation beaches of **Greece**. As each wave of men came ashore on **Crete** it spread west and south-west, flowing along the narrow tracks between a jumble of hills and seeping away into the shady olive groves.

In the beginning it was a disorganised army, without guns or trucks and seriously lacking in other equipment. With the irrepressible spirit of a phoenix it pieced itself together, gathered in supplies as quickly as they could be brought from **Egypt**, gave every armed man a fighting role, and set about arranging yet another reception for the constantly following German forces.



Brewing up
Brewing up

A dust-storm at the Supply Point at Qasaba



A dust-storm at the Supply Point at Qasaba



Sollum, December 1940
Sollum, December 1940

Bardia Harbour from Upper Bardia



Bardia Harbour from Upper Bardia



A Supply Column truck after a crash into an Egyptian petrol tanker
in December 1940. Both drivers were killed

**A Supply Column truck after a crash into an Egyptian petrol tanker in December 1940. Both
drivers were killed**

Breaking camp at Qasaba before the move to Greece



Breaking camp at **Qasaba** before the move to **Greece**



Supply Column billets at Dene Lodge, Ash Green, England in
September 1940

Supply Column billets at Dene Lodge, Ash Green, England in September 1940

Lunch time in the Supply Column area in Katerini



Lunch time in the Supply Column area in **Katerini**



The first organised group of Supply Column men came with the first arrivals on 25 April; the last organised group was that from **Kea Island**, which arrived on the 27th. Thereafter the stragglers came drifting in in all manner of craft.

The ships of the first wave moved into **Suda Bay** on the afternoon of Anzac Day. The white walls of **Suda** clustered at the water's edge; rolling hills went back to snow-capped mountains. And in the foreground, intrusive and incongruous, bomb-scarred ships were discharging into a multitude of small craft shuttling back and forth between ship and shore. The stocking up of **Crete** was now a top-priority task, and everywhere there was movement, unceasing and urgent.

Landing craft took the men ashore. On the docks they threaded their way through a litter of military stores, wandered on along the palm-lined waterfront, where Bofors squatted in sand-bag nests, and tramped out along the white coast road to the west. At the end of a dusty march they found hot cocoa, chocolate, five cigarettes each and oranges waiting for them at a field kitchen in an olive grove several miles from the docks. From here they moved on to an overnight resting place under olive trees.

The next day the remnants of Supply Column formed up and to the skirl of pipes played by Driver **Munro**¹ marched the 10 miles to **Ay Marina**, a small village almost midway between **Canea** and **Maleme**,

where New Zealand Force Headquarters was set up. As they stepped smartly past a field hospital nurses came out to cheer and to ask whether they thought they had won the war.

A schoolhouse on a terrace facing the sea became Column Headquarters, and the men scattered among the groves, each group selecting and settling around a tree as though it were home. There was a technique to dossing down under an olive tree. Once a man had some security of tenure and knew that the effort was worth while, he would choose the biggest tree he could find so that its ample trunk would provide a windbreak, then hollow out a shallow trench, building up the sides with the excavated spoil. The bottom was then padded with green oats, wheat, tares, grass, or whatever was handy, and a groundsheet—if a man was lucky enough to have one—was spread over the top. Whatever bedding a man had was made up on top of this. This was a comfortable arrangement, and though the nights were chilly at first, spring warmth soon provided an ideal climate for alfresco living.

For all its pastoral beauty and apparent remoteness from the pursuing Germans, **Crete** was not entirely peaceful. Already there were disturbing stories of an attempted sea invasion, and on 29 April sounds of gunfire were heard out at sea. Aircraft were in the sky, and for a day or so at least they were friendly, but it was not long before the familiar hostile drone of enemy machines sent men for cover, and the anti-aircraft guns began to bark.

Crete for a while offered a respite, but no real security and very little chance to rest. There was work to do. Supply Column, of course, had the inevitable job of feeding the troops, and on 28 April—the day of arrival at **Ay Marina**—a DID was set up at the schoolhouse by No. 1 Echelon supply details.

Next day the remainder of the Column was organised into three groups of about 100 men each. They were:

Headquarters group, consisting of Column Headquarters and J

Section. Its officers were Major Pryde, Captain Morris and Lieutenant Julian. ²

No. 1 Echelon group, which became a 'company' of four platoons under Captain Hook. Platoon commanders were Lieutenants Hastie and McKenzie ³ **and Second-Lieutenants Hunter** ⁴ **and Henshaw.** ⁵

No. 2 Echelon group, similarly organised under Captain Boyce. Its platoon commanders were Captain Radford ⁶ **(an Ammunition Company officer), Lieutenants Rawle and Ward, and Sergeant Earl.** ⁷

Major Davis and Captain McIndoe operated the DID, and Captain Butterfield was requisitioning officer.

Thus reorganised, the Column began an unaccustomed life as an infantry unit.

The following day (30 April) Major-General Freyberg assumed command of the forces on Crete and the responsibility for the island's defence. He might have been excused misgivings. He had a curiously assorted army, much of it poorly equipped and untrained as infantry, and the territory he was to defend was a 160-mile-long island with its most easily defended coast facing away from the enemy. He formed four centres of resistance: Maleme, Suda- Canea, Retimo and Heraklion.

The New Zealanders, under the command of Brigadier Puttick, ⁸ **prepared defences in the Maleme and Suda- Canea sectors. Maleme, with its vital airfield, was given to 5 Brigade. Galatas, a pivot of the Suda- Canea defences, became eventually the responsibility of the heterogeneous 10 Brigade, which was formed partly from the unequipped ASC, artillery and Divisional Cavalry detachments and grew from what was first known as Oakes Force. Fourth Brigade, less 20 Battalion, and 1 Welch Regiment were west of Canea as a force reserve. The 20th Battalion was later incorporated into 10 Brigade, but as the divisional reserve it was not to be used without permission. Three Greek regiments, each of two untrained battalions, were also allotted places in the defence plan.**

In the brief weeks before the German invasion there was much to do. Quite apart from the main task of preparing the island's defences, there was a vast amount of organisation to be performed, supplies to be obtained, and thousands of daily problems to be overcome.

From the [Middle East](#) weapons, ammunition, food and equipment had to be brought. So urgent was the need for these and so inadequate the ports of [Crete](#) to handle the ships that the bare necessities of life for the men took second priority, and the thousands without so much as ground sheets, blankets and razors could not be immediately provided with these things from imports. To give each man at least one blanket, a general collection and redistribution was ordered.

Many men had saved their weapons and nothing else, but there were literally thousands without arms, equipment, essential clothing and other necessities, and many without even parent units to look after them. There were estimated to be 10,000 other ranks without arms, and according to an official report, 'with little or no other employment other than getting into trouble with the civil population.' All these were an encumbrance to the island's strained resources and were to be shipped away at the earliest opportunity. Most of the Supply Column men were included among those to be sent to [Egypt](#); Captain Boyce's No. 2 Echelon group alone was earmarked from the start for a place in the defence forces. Of the rest of the unit, one group, the Headquarters group, was sent away. Captain Hook's No. 1 Echelon group remained in a state of suspense and in the end stayed to fight.

The Column was split within a few days of its conversion to infantry at the end of April. Boyce's group moved over to [Galatas](#) to join [Oakes Force](#), one of the defence groups set up in the early days. Hook's group and Headquarters group awaited developments at [Ay Marina](#), where of course the DID was operating.

About a week later—on 8 May—Headquarters and Hook's group were moved to a camp near [Galatas](#). Nothing was known for sure, but there

were rumours that Supply Column, Boyce's group excluded, was to be evacuated, and as if to confirm the story those at the **Galatas** camp began a march next day towards the port. While approaching **Canea** they were overhauled by a despatch rider and diverted to Camp A, behind **Canea**. **Major Pryde** and Sergeant-Major Pullen, however, embarked on this day at **Suda** as ship's staff on the vessel *Rodi*, a battered, former Italian vessel that had been captured at **Tobruk**.

The remainder of Headquarters and Hook's group settled down beneath the thick spread of the gnarled olive trees at Camp A. Life was leisurely and boring. Rations were short, but eggs, bread and oranges could be bought, often by barter with cigarettes. Enemy aircraft were not unduly troublesome, and the only duties were standing guard at the villa near the camp where King George II of **Greece**, Prince Paul, and their staffs were living.

When the Dutch ship *Nieuw Zeeland*, bringing among other things six I tanks and their crews and the **Kiwi Concert Party**—all most welcome—dropped anchor in **Suda Bay** on 14 May, there was again speculation among Supply Column men on their chances of being taken off. But space was limited, and when Headquarters and J Section had been allowed for, the situation resolved itself into an issue between Hook's group and Ammunition Company, an issue that was settled by a toss of the coin. The ASC padre, Father **Henley**,⁹ spun the coin. Eyes followed it through the air, and Hook called. As the coin fell to the ground someone in Ammunition Company said, 'Now hook your frame out of it.' Hook had lost.

With 1658 passengers—troops and civilians—on board, the *Nieuw Zeeland* put out from **Suda** at 1.40 p.m. as low-flying German planes came whining in for an attack.

Evacuation was always a possibility for Hook's group, but it never came. For the next week or so the men lounged about, dug a little, and uneasily watched the increasing activity of the air raiders. Some men helped unload ships.

King George and Prince Paul were visitors to the officers' mess during this period, and several times had cause to borrow a slit trench.

On the morning of the invasion Hook's group was still at the transit camp and still awaiting embarkation. It stayed to fight as part of a battalion under Captain Page, of the **Royal Tank Corps. For its task it had, besides rifles, only two Bren guns, and a limited amount of ammunition.**

Boyce's group went through the pre-invasion lull in a different frame of mind. It had for the time being to forget its nostalgic longing for its trucks and for the perks that went with ASC work and go back to foot soldiering. 'I felt like a cowboy without a horse,' was how one man put it.

From the time it was peeled away from the rest of the Column, Boyce's group wandered from place to place, and was in five different positions before it finally established itself in what became **10 Brigade's defence line. When it left **Ay Marina** on 30 April it marched down the coast road to an area near **Galatas** to join **Oakes Force**, and the next day moved to **Ruin Hill**, a commanding feature west of **Galatas** that took its name from a ruined crofter's cottage on the crest. The group made its presence felt very promptly by seizing three warders from the nearby **Aghya** prison as suspected fifth columnists, but released them after questioning.**

With a broad panorama of land and sea below them, the men settled here for a few days and adjusted themselves to **Crete and the makeshift ways of their reorganised lines. Laden with pack, rifle and fifty rounds of ammunition, they could hardly be said to be reconciled to their earthbound existence, but they made the best of things. The cooks, in particular, adapted themselves to their primitive facilities—four-gallon petrol tins. They turned out breakfasts of tinned bacon and beans, and lunches of M and V, and sometimes boiled rice flavoured with dried fruit. With each meal was an issue of one and a half slices of bread a man, margarine and marmalade, golden syrup or cheese, and sometimes bully**

beef and salmon. To supplement this diet there were always oranges to be bought from the ubiquitous vendors, who throughout the **Middle East** had a habit of rising as though from the ground in the most unlikely places. On **Crete** they came with two brimming baskets slung across a donkey, or sometimes the vendor was just a boy carrying a single basket.

On 6 May the men loaded themselves up again and trudged down the prison road, past the massive, stone, white-painted prison that was soon to become a central feature in their lives, and down to where **Russell Force** was established near the **Aghya** Reservoir, at the foot of **Observation Hill**. **Russell Force**, created two days earlier, consisted of **Divisional Cavalry** and **Petrol Company** turned infantry. Its commander was Major **Russell**,¹⁰ of **Divisional Cavalry**.

Water was simmering over a fire and the men were settling in when an aircraft droned into view. Over went the pots and the fires hissed and spluttered, but the plane turned away with apparent disinterest.

The atmosphere here was pleasant if primitive. The men ate from tins, cooked their food with wood gathered from far and wide, and lived in bivouacs of grass. The main task was to keep lookout from a steeply rising spur just above the camp known as **Observation Hill**. Training included the siting and digging of section posts along the ridges, linking up with **Divisional Cavalry** to the west, and the preparation of range cards. From **Divisional Cavalry** they learned the rudiments of morse and semaphore.

Off duty there were diversions: a pool to swim in, wine to be bought and a few villages to visit, and there was even scope for misbehaviour. CB for the rebellious included climbing **Observation Hill** and reporting back as many times as possible in daylight, a form of punishment that at least helped to toughen up. On marches there were excellent beaches at **Ay Marina** where hot, dusty troops could cool off.

Food, which had to be packed across the fields from the road, usually around midnight, was in short supply, and the men contributed

ten drachmae each to buy a sheep.

A mock battle staged by **19 Battalion** for the benefit of Greek troops was the next disturbance. Boyce's group was on the 'battleground' and moved aside. After watching mortars plaster a hill, it moved back to its camp, but the next day—it was now about 13 May—shouldered belongings and moved back to **Ruin Hill**.

On the 12th a composite brigade, which later became **10 Brigade**, had been formed from **Oakes Force** and **6 Greek Battalion**. **Colonel Kippenberger**¹¹ took command on 14 May, and next day **Oakes Force** became the **Composite Battalion**. **Composite Battalion** consisted of three groups, each of which caused some confusion by calling itself a battalion. They were: RMT group, consisting of 270 officers and men of this unit commanded by Captain **Veale**,¹² of **4 Field Regiment**, and with other artillery officers; **4 Field Regiment** group, consisting of about 200 officers and men, mainly from this regiment, and commanded by Captain **Bliss**¹³; and a mixed group under Major **Sprosen**,¹⁴ of **5 Field Regiment**, consisting of 250 men of **Petrol Company** under Captain **McDonagh**,¹⁵ about 140 of **Supply Column** under Captain Boyce, and about 150 officers and men of **5 Field Regiment** directly under Major **Sprosen**.

The brigade consisted of this battalion, a **Divisional Cavalry** detachment, and **6 and 8 Greek Battalions**.

Boyce's group itself was reorganised at this time. Radford became divisional ammunition officer, and the group—a company, really—reformed into three platoons under Lieutenants Rawle and Ward and Sergeant Earl.

Rumours and official and unofficial speculation of the probable invasion date were rife when Boyce's group was absorbed into these forces. There was an air of tension, and suspected fifth columnists, among them the warders from the gaol, were rounded up and imprisoned—the warders in their own lock-ups.

Preparations were pushed ahead. All this time shipping had been running the gauntlet of prowling German planes, and under the rain of their bombs had been discharging at **Suda**. Ships were sunk en route and blown up in the harbour, and the supplies reaching **Crete** were a dribble. There was, fortunately, plenty of wire, plenty of light automatics, a fair number of mortars, six I tanks and sixteen light tanks, and even a few trucks had been brought ashore. Forty-six field guns, each with 300 rounds, reached **Crete**, but the New Zealanders had been busy forming an artillery force of their own with guns of various nationalities—3.7-inch British howitzers, French and Italian 75-millimetre pieces and a German 77-millimetre—and had been repairing them, devising sights and calibrating. Two items of which there was a desperate shortage were picks and shovels.

The general policy of **Creforce** was to seek arms and equipment rather than reinforcements, but before the German attack part of the **Mobile Naval Base Defence Organisation** arrived with coast and ack-ack guns, searchlights, and crews—a total of 2000-odd **Royal Marines**.

With this material and equipment the island's forces were formed.

Composite Battalion's positions were on a ridge running south from the sea just west of **Galatas**. Rising almost from sea level, the ridge ran inland in a series of rounded peaks to **Ruin Hill**. From there southwards the ground fell away into a valley of fields and groves. The **Composite Battalion** line followed this ridge inland to **Ruin Hill**, then with a bend like a hockey stick turned to the east to shield **Galatas** from the south.

Ruin Hill, a lozenge-shaped feature dotted with trees and crowned by a patch of wheat, was a key point. Northwards the men had a vista that took in Theodoroi Island (seen over by **Ay Marina**), the **Composite Battalion** line (running from **Ruin Hill** itself, down over the hump of **Red Hill** to where the ridge tailed away into the sea), the white tents of 7 General Hospital, the village of **Galatas**, and beyond its off-white walls the town of **Canea**. To the south-west they could see across to a system of ridges which, piling up to a peak at Observation Hill, near where

Divisional Cavalry was still in position, curtained **Maleme** and **Galatas** from each other. To the south they looked down on quilted olive groves, through which were traced cart tracks and ditches, and onto which was printed a clearing of fields, the white prison road and the prison itself. Behind all this were heaped the **White Mountains**, the backbone of the western half of the island. To the east and just south of **Galatas** was **Pink Hill**, and a little to the right of this and further away **Cemetery Hill**, where **19 Battalion** and **6 Greek Battalion** sheltered the other side of **Galatas**.

From its admirable grandstand Boyce's group saw everything that went on about it. Bombers, becoming 'more prevalent', as one man expressively puts it, could be seen hammering at the **Suda Bay** area and snapping back irritably at the anti-aircraft guns on the surrounding hills. **RAF** fighters from **Maleme** were seen to come out and, in spite of German fighter escorts, chase some of the invaders out of the sky. On 18 May one bomber of a flight attacking the port was seen to break away and, swinging over the clearly marked hospital area, let go a stick obviously aimed at a group of men bathing on a nearby beach. The first bomb burst billowed up among a row of bell tents at the northern edge of the hospital area, and from the hill men could be seen running about. Two NCOs were killed. The other three bombs of the stick fell in the sea, one near the bathers. Another incident seen from the hill was the machine-gunning of a small boat in the bay. Soon after another boat was seen to pull out from land and tow the craft in.

Orders to wire its area were received by Boyce's group on 17 May, and the next day dispositions of platoons were settled. As wiring was pushed ahead battle positions were assumed, ranging carried out, arcs of fire determined, LMGs sited, communications linked up and ammunition and water details dealt with. All the while a constant lookout was kept towards the sea.

There were three Bren guns—one to each platoon—but the group had as well a .55-inch Boys anti-tank rifle for which there were three rounds—one, it turned out, a dud.

The wiring plan, finished on 19 May, not a day too early, included a cunningly conceived 'mat' rigged by Lieutenant Ward in a vineyard to such effect that the invaders almost certainly believed it to be a heavily mined area; possibly it influenced their line of attack, which ignored the hill.

At evening on 19 May Boyce's group was ready in its defences. To the left (east) and slightly to the rear was the **5 Field Regiment** group, and to the left of this again **Petrol Company**, these two forming the southern side of the **Composite Battalion** sector. To the right and north of **Ruin Hill** was another artillery 'company'.

There was one other important Supply Column group on the island: the men who operated the DID and fed the Division. The **Crete** battle leaves in the mind a confused picture—like a hot mud pool bubbling and spurting steam at random—but through it ran a thread of organisation. It was a frail thread, not always equal to the strain, but along its slender length the army services continued to operate, improvising where necessary and taking the initiative where a break was found. The supply of rations was one of these services.

There was never enough food on **Crete**, but what there was had to be distributed somehow to the scattered New Zealand units. The prospect was not encouraging: the Column, as a supply unit, was whittled down to a skeleton; transport was negligible; and units were dispersed. The transport problem was solved by reversing the usual procedure: instead of units coming for their rations, the Column delivered to units, and these deliveries were to be maintained through almost continual strafing and bombing.

For the first few days the Division was supplied from an existing DID through a Supply Column officer, Lieutenant McIndoe. As the New Zealand forces grew the Column set up its own DID on 28 April in the disused schoolhouse at **Ay Marina**. Four Supply Column men, Sergeant **Dunn** ¹⁶ and Drivers **Brown**, ¹⁷ **Fisher** ¹⁸ and **Chinnery**, ¹⁹ were posted to

unsteady under fire—and Supply Column drivers took over the vehicles.

The insecurity of the DID in no-man's-land between **Maleme** and **Galatas** was pointed out on 13 May by Brigadier **Hargest**,²⁰ and it moved on the night of 18–19 May to an open position under olive groves on the prison road, two miles south-west of **Canea**, not far from where Hook's group was still patiently waiting. The move to this new location was begun at 8.30 p.m., and by midnight all rations and every tin of the POL was stowed away beneath olive trees. The only shelter here were slit trenches that had been dug by the **Welch Regiment**.

Operating from here as it had done from the earlier position, the supply section despatched trucks singly, each with a driver and NCO, to unit meeting points. Carrying parties shouldered the rations to their positions.

On the evening of 19 May, therefore, Supply Column was in three parts: Boyce's No. 2 Echelon group on **Ruin Hill** at an angle in **Composite Battalion's** defences; Hook's No. 1 Echelon group at Camp A, waiting and wondering; and McIndoe's DID on the prison road; just off the **Canea- Maleme** road.

As industrious as ever, the enemy all this time had been preparing to put into effect his **MERCURY** plan. The island defenders were expecting at the most 10,000 airborne troops and 20,000 seaborne troops. This, in fact, was what the enemy was planning to send. Shielded by 650 fighters, bombers and reconnaissance aircraft of the German **8 Air Corps**, **II Air Corps** was to bring in troops in 600 to 650 troop-carriers and seventy to eighty gliders. The **Assault Regiment** was to capture **Maleme** airfield. The **3rd Parachute Regiment** was to capture **Canea**. Two battalions of **2 Parachute Regiment** were to take **Retimo** and probe into **Suda**. The **1st Parachute Regiment**, supported by a battalion of **2 Parachute Regiment**, was to take **Heraklion**. To follow up by sea and air was **5 Mountain Division**.

When the men on **Crete** went to bed on the night of 19 May this

German force was stirring to life. In **Greece**, in the **Dodecanese** and on some of the larger islands of the Aegean there was movement of men and planes. The propellers began to spin and equipment-laden troops filed into their aircraft. The clock ticked past midnight, and the first troop-carriers roared, lifted cumbrously into the air, and swung away to the south.

Out of the clear **Mediterranean** sky around 6 a.m. on 20 May the first throbbing flights of bombers came down over **Maleme** for the usual session of 'morning hate'. For about an hour they beat up a thunderous pall around the airfield, then droned off to the north. Quietness settled again. 'An unnatural quietness—like the heavy, tense atmosphere that precedes an electric storm,' wrote Rawle, who from **Ruin Hill** had heard the rumble of heavy bombing coming from both **Maleme** and **Canea**. 'Even the birds were silent, as though they sensed the distant pulsating engines before the human ear could hear them.'

The men at **Maleme** had finished their breakfast in peace when the bombers came again and for ninety minutes pulverised the earth around the airfield. After each wave of bombers came the fighters, raking the ground through the rising dust. Then, as the blitz lifted, the tri-motored Junkers 52s spread across the sky and paratroops fluttered away behind them.

Galatas escaped the main weight of this air bombardment, and while those at **Maleme** were flattened to the earth, the troops at **Galatas** were already dealing with the first invading Germans. The first enemy troops bumped on to Cretan soil here about 8 a.m.

In the ominous lull after the first **Maleme** bomb the Supply Column men on **Ruin Hill** bolted their breakfast; they were hurrying to their battle stations about 7.20 a.m. as the drone of the first **Galatas**-bound aircraft came from the north. Skimming low over Theodoroi Island, they came over at a cheeky altitude. Then down came the bombs and a curtain of machine-gun fire, erupting around **Galatas**, the ridges running down to the sea and between the prison and the lake or reservoir of

On **Ruin Hill** the men had still not reached their trenches when the aircraft came over, and they flattened where they were. The strafing dragged through its clamorous course of howling engines, blasting bombs and tearing machine guns. Then about eight o'clock the situation changed abruptly.

'By now the air was full of aircraft and the roar and din was deafening,' writes Driver **Farley**.²¹ 'Someone ventured to look up, and then exclaimed, "Hell, look at the size of these things." I took a glance and saw planes bigger than anything I had ever seen before, and they were just crawling through the air like a hawk compared with a sparrow.'

They were not so large as they may have appeared, but to these crouching men their tapered wings seemed to span the sky. The men who had reached their positions saw more.

As the Germans' zero hour ticked by 'we saw three gliders flatten out near the dam,' writes Rawle. 'A state of paralysis seized us. Our mouths went dry. Then a wedge of low-flying Junkers, trap doors open, came in over Theodoroi Island, lazily droned inland and split up into groups of three.'

Spraying explosive bullets as they went, these machines banked in over the tree-covered plain and the hills behind **Canea**. Then the fighters and bombers drew off and the air barrage ceased. The slow, heavy machines were down to about 300 feet when the parachutists came plummeting out, their parachutes snapping taut and ballooning out. Rawle says, 'We could see every detail: the swinging trap doors in the belly of the fuselage, the pilots craning to see their handiwork.'

Then the spell broke. Machine guns and rifles crackled on all sides and the bullets went zipping among the descending enemy. From one plane dropping in this area, only three men reached the ground unhurt, and those dropping nearer the British lines were mostly killed in the air or on the ground.

Parachutes could be seen sagging to earth around the prison, on the rising ground near **Galatas**, in the groves around **Ruin Hill**, in front of **Petrol Company** and on the heights south of the road across the valley. Around the prison men could be seen freeing themselves from their harness and arranging their parachutes as ground signals.

At 1200 yards these men were a tricky target, and the Bren guns of 1 and 2 Platoons, which were given the task of checking this activity, were indifferent in their aim. However, the spattering of bullets sent the prisoners running for cover, and they did not appear again until later in the day. An enemy mortar to the right of the prison also withdrew behind the shelter of the building.

The paratroopers continued to drift down from passing flights of Junkers. About 150 who landed near **Galatas** found themselves in **19 Battalion's** area: they were quickly dealt with. **Composite Battalion** kept up fire from behind its defences but made no sorties. In their training the men of this unit had given an unfavourable impression and it was feared that in an attack they would be unable to hold together; their consequent disorganisation would have left a dangerous gap in the defences. **Colonel Kippenberger** pleaded unsuccessfully for either **19** or **20 Battalion** to be brought under command to counter-attack.

On **Ruin Hill** Boyce's group had a purely defensive role too. It was to hold the hill and that part of the line behind the wire between the hill and **Petrol Company's** right flank. Supply Column men had to watch in maddening frustration while the enemy troops did as they wished around the prison—even to the extent of driving a British truck up and down the road between the prison and the dam as they concentrated their troops—and they were disappointed they could not patrol. But here again the decision against patrolling was based on what had been seen during training. 'I am sorry I didn't give permission to use patrols, but anyone who saw the ASC patrols would understand why I did not,' **Colonel Kippenberger** explains. 'Under fire their common-sense asserted itself and they did patrols much better than in exercises, which they

undertook unwillingly.'

Thus free to move about as they pleased, the invaders quickly gathered their forces and within an hour put in a thrust towards **Galatas**. The 6th Greek Battalion, straddling the prison road, had not distributed ammunition received the previous day, and when the Greeks' few rounds were expended they withdrew. The German drive came on **Petrol Company**. Weaving through the thickets and groves, the Germans approached to within 100 yards before they came into the open. The **Petrol Company** commander, Captain McDonagh, was fatally wounded and the second-in-command, Second-Lieutenant Jackson, ²² seriously hit. Senior NCOs took over, and the line held. Some of **Pink Hill**, which had not been properly manned, was lost, however, and **Galatas** was threatened.

As the racket of the approaching battle clapped down around them, civilians on the outskirts of **Galatas** panicked, and their screams as they fled from their houses could be heard from **Ruin Hill** above the general din. Three Greek girls who found their way into Supply Column's lines took refuge in Lieutenant Ward's slit trench and huddled there until driven out by mortar fire next day.

Galatas, meanwhile, was threatened from the north also. Paratroopers had captured 7 British Hospital and drove some of the staff and patients along the road to **Galatas**. The 18th and 19th Battalions took a hand, rescued the prisoners, recaptured the hospital and wiped out the enemy.

On the south of **Galatas** Greeks formed a line and advanced, linking up with **19 Battalion** to the east. In **Galatas**, however, there were still a few stray Germans.

About midday bullets came whizzing up from the groves towards Supply Column on **Ruin Hill**. The Headquarters runner, Driver **Johnson**, ²³ unwillingly provided a bright interlude when he was shot in the buttocks. As the others went to earth he was heard to cry, 'My God, I'm

hit in the bum,' and there was a general howl of laughter. Corporal **Ewing**,²⁴ of the RAP, responded to the distraught pleas of a Greek couple whose child had been badly injured in the aerial blitz; he went to their cottage and was not seen again.

Things began to warm up again on **Ruin Hill** about 2 p.m. when mortars, machine guns and aircraft swept the area in support of the attack against the **Petrol Company** positions. The Germans advanced some distance towards **Petrol Company** without encountering opposition, then abruptly met withering fire from rifles and machine guns. With 50 per cent casualties, half of whom were killed, the Germans fell back to the prison, now being used as a dressing station. Some detachments, however, still remained on **Pink Hill**.

Away to the south-west, near the dam, Divisional Cavalry was isolated and threatened by superior forces, a situation in which it had been ordered to withdraw. A patrol was sent out to tell it to come in, but Major Russell was already bringing his force in. The group took up a position at **Galatas**.

As dusk approached all German thrusts had been repelled, but the situation was uneasy. A German prisoner said that more troops were arriving that night, and at 7 p.m. **Colonel Kippenberger** suggested to **Divisional Headquarters** that if no counter-attack could be mounted to clear the prison area, where it was suspected that a landing field was being prepared, **10 Brigade** should withdraw after dark to a shorter line north and south, straddling the **Maleme** road.

The attack was ordered and assigned to **19 Battalion**. It might have accomplished a great deal, but actually achieved nothing; it falls into the category of 'might have beens', which are fairly freely scattered throughout any battle, and of which **Crete** had its fair share. One company passed between Ruin and Wheat Hills, and the other company between the latter and **Galatas**; three light tanks of **3 Hussars** were in support and one of them became noisily entangled with Supply Column's wire. There was a certain amount of vagueness about the whole affair.

Composite Battalion men might have lent supporting fire, but knowing nothing about the counter-attack, could do nothing to help. The attackers themselves, with no clear idea of where their objective was, settled down for the night after going a few hundred yards. The operation was to have been resumed in the morning but was called off.

As the noise of this skirmish died away, Supply Column men not engaged in digging better positions with the few precious picks and shovels available tried unsuccessfully to sleep.

Hook's group, at Camp A, had put in a very useful day—a rather busier one, in fact, than Boyce's. Breakfast was sizzling over the fires when the air blitz started, and the men grasped their rifles. For a while they were spectators. They watched the first flights of Junkers come in lazily from the sea and spill out parachutists over **Galatas**. The multi-coloured parachutes drifted out of sight behind a ridge. Elsewhere things were happening; they could hear the battle of **Crete** crackling to life, but they had nothing to do but watch the north. At last, between 9 and 10 a.m., as a number of civilians and evacuated seamen were wandering through the positions, a flight of broad-winged Junkers flew over them and some parachutists came swinging down.

Bren and rifle muzzles went into the air and the bullets tearing upwards caught several Germans as they swung in their harness; the fabrics of some parachutes ripped to shreds and the men fell like stones. One whose parachute became entangled in an olive tree was quickly disposed of.

Those who reached the ground took refuge in heavy undergrowth close to Hook's group. Lieutenant McKenzie set about organising a defence line, linking up with Australian troops on the left and a New Zealand ordnance group on the right.

In the midst of all this a British captain, resplendent in brass buttons, sat under an olive tree, apparently taking notes on what was happening.

In front of 4 Platoon was a clearing about 100 yards broad, ending in a partly dry creek. Into this clearing parachuted a large, bright container. Second-Lieutenant **Henshaw** and Sergeant Jefcoate debated its contents; possibly it was a booby trap.

‘I asked Corporal **Campbell** ²⁵ to jack up a couple of shots into it to see if it would explode,’ says Jefcoate. Campbell was applying this test when a runner came forward from Hook with instructions to clean out a machine-gun post the enemy had established beyond the creek—about 300 yards away—opposite 4 Platoon and covering the container. Jefcoate says:

Henshaw immediately said to me, ‘Come on and bring the boys,’ and he dashed off ahead. Darcy **Hatsell** ²⁶ was on his right, I on his left and slightly behind, and Campbell, Jim **Washer** ²⁷ and Wickie **Newman** ²⁸ on my left. As **Henshaw** neared the container, which we had to pass, we met a burst of fire. **Henshaw** fell beside the container. Hatsell said, ‘I’m hit,’ and I felt a crack on my right ribs.

Henshaw was dead and Hatsell wounded in the right lung. Jefcoate, who was carrying the spare ammunition in his haversack, told Hatsell to crawl back to the lines while he went on. Jefcoate dashed for the creek with bullets whipping up the dust around him. He flung himself into the creek bed—and landed in the platoon's latrine.

I joined Campbell, Washer and Newman in the bottom of the creek (Jefcoate's story continues). A redheaded Tommy sergeant came from somewhere. He had a few hand grenades and was trying to get close to a house near the creek in which some Jerries were sniping from a window. He went off on his own job, and we tried to find out just where our objective was hidden.

At this stage two Greek boys, civilians, armed with old Greek rifles with long octagonal bayonets attached, came along the creek and said to us, ‘We find 'em,’ and away they went too. The next thing we knew a grenade exploded near us. Several more arrived and exploded too close

for comfort. I stood up to have a look in the direction from which they were coming. Campbell stood up also. The next thing I knew a grenade hit me in the stomach with an awful smack but did not explode until it was passing my right knee.

That put Jefcoate out of the running, but the other men went on and flushed a German nest from a grain field.

The English sergeant, meanwhile, was working in towards the house, visible also from D Section's positions under the olive trees. During this time the metal container was recovered and found to contain a Spandau machine gun and four boxes of ammunition, which Driver **Drake**²⁹ brought into action as English troops closed in on the house. A grenade through a window finished the job, and shortly afterwards the English troops emerged escorting twenty-seven Germans and displaying a red and black swastika flag.

This ended the day's excitement for No. 1 Echelon. Unmolested for the rest of the afternoon, this group utilised the time digging in, arranging passwords and organising pickets. During the night there was only one disturbance. Hearing movement in the undergrowth, the sentry, Driver **Taylor**,³⁰ called halt three times, and receiving no reply fired a few shots. The noise ceased, but it was an uneasy night. A search at first light revealed a dead donkey.

The DID on the prison road escaped attention from paratroops on this first day, though the men there saw them fall some distance away—too far away to deal with. Their open dump, however, was an invitation to aircraft, and fighters prowling around at tree-top level came down with machine-gun and cannon fire at the slightest sign of movement.

From the moment of the invasion the distribution of rations was immensely complicated. Fortunately many of the troops were too busy and too tense on the first day to give food even a thought; movement on the roads in daylight became impossible for ration trucks. That night the trucks growled cautiously along dark roads as drivers peered about

for familiar landmarks—and for any sign of the ubiquitous enemy.

At the end of the day the enemy in the **Galatas** area was on the defensive; but at **Maleme** he had succeeded in getting a toehold on the vital airfield and by the next morning was in full possession of it.

Further east, at **Retimo** and **Heraklion**, German parachutists and glider-borne troops had come down as scheduled during the afternoon, but at neither place had serious threats developed, and when darkness came the situation, though uncomfortable, was in hand.

While, under cover of darkness, the defenders of **Crete** were swinging picks to improve positions, watching for signs of the enemy or just trying to sleep, more planes were droning down from the north. First came the brisk little Messerschmitts and the Dorniers, and behind them the Stukas. As the sun came up over the island the fighters and bombers went to work again with punctual enthusiasm.

At **Maleme** soon after 8 a.m. a Dornier that had been bombing the airfield perimeter swooped down and landed. Shellbursts blossomed around it, but the plane gathered way again and was quickly off the ground. From this the enemy learned that although he held the airfield it was still not his to use at will. Elsewhere—on the beaches and further inland—troop-transport machines crash-landed, and more paratroops came showering down. Not until late in the afternoon did the enemy attempt to use the airfield for a hazardous air ferry service. Like firewalkers, the Ju 52s skimmed down, discharged their troops, and took off again.

At **Galatas** the day began with the expectation of trouble. During the night a message had come from Force Headquarters that the German plan was to mass parachutists along the valley road and thrust through **Galatas** and the hospital and along the main road to **Canea**. Ammunition was to be dropped at midday at points to be indicated by the enemy with green smoke signals. In addition to this, other reports said that the Germans had landed on the coast by the hospital.

As it turned out the day was relatively quiet along most of the front—to begin with, patrols failed to locate the reported landing parties—but there was a spirited dispute over the possession of **Cemetery Hill**, which the Germans had occupied during the night. Apart from this the main activity consisted of exchanges of fire: mortar bombs and machine-gun and rifle bullets from the enemy, and artillery, machine-gun and rifle fire in return. This included fire from two Vickers established that morning on **Wheat Hill**, to the left rear of Captain Boyce's company, where **5 Field Regiment** group was in position.

The Luftwaffe, of course, was everywhere, though **Ruin Hill** escaped attention for some time. During the morning it was allotted its share of mortar and machine-gun fire, and a platoon headquarters sited in a hole on the slope of the hill was demolished by a direct hit from a mortar bomb, fortunately while the platoon commander, Lieutenant Rawle, was away.

The scene of the main action of the day was **Cemetery Hill**. A company of **19 Battalion**, with some help from two light tanks and supported by mortars, pushed the enemy off this feature soon after midday, capturing about fourteen machine guns and ammunition, destroying four mortars and taking several prisoners. But the hill was bald and a most uncomfortable spot from whichever way it was defended. Machine-gun and mortar fire sent the **19 Battalion** company back, and the hill became no-man's-land.

Enemy attention to **Ruin Hill** became more troublesome at midday, and the first casualties of the day came in the afternoon. A mortar bomb burst right in a trench, wounding five, two seriously. Lieutenant Ward was stunned by flying rock. The three Greek girls in his trench fled. One of the wounded died shortly afterwards; it was the first death.

Because of casualties and fire, it was decided about 4 p.m. to pull 1 Platoon back from the forward positions. A Bren gun was moved up to the crest and installed in the ripening wheat.

The attack from the valley was still expected, and the **Ruin Hill** defenders, on their important feature, were not altogether happy. However, reinforcements in the form of twelve gunners under Lieutenant **Dill** ³¹ enabled 1 Platoon positions to be manned again. No. 3 Platoon, less one section, took up positions on the eastern side of the hill, the remaining section linking up with **Petrol Company** across the hollow, 200 yards back from the wire.

The day drew on but there was no attack. The atmosphere was taut and the tension was reflected in an inability to swallow food. 'I recall on about the second day there was bread and margarine with cheese passed around,' says Farley. 'It took me all my time to swallow a bit of bread. It just seemed to stick in my throat. A drink of tea was a Godsend; in fact I drank it out of an unwashed M and V tin that was at hand on the bank and declared it the best drink I had ever had.'

But though there was no attack, the enemy was visibly active. Away on Observation Hill (also known as **Signal Hill**) to the south-west, Greek civilians who had been released from the gaol could be seen driving a laden donkey up to the summit, possibly to establish a German observation post.

Hook's No. 1 Echelon group did little this day. In the morning it retired sixty yards nearer **Canea** with the intention of digging an anti-tank ditch. However, a new order sent it further away from its old position, and after taking up a new defensive position it was engaged in digging and wiring, a task in which it persisted in spite of constant air attack.

As darkness closed down on **Crete** again the men on **Ruin Hill** saw red, green and white flares, darting tracer and bursting shells scintillating over **Cemetery Hill**. Around midnight vivid orange flashes stabbed the darkness out to sea and searchlights swung across the sky. Guns grumbled, then explosions erupted dyspeptically. A searchlight's beam would sweep an arc then freeze onto a spot, with tracer darting after it. Then the steady glow of fires tinged the night. All this, although

it was not clear to those on land at the time, was the intercepting by the Royal Navy of the Germans' first attempt to bring in troops and equipment by sea. Not one craft reached the island.

As the clock turned around into 22 May—the third day of the invasion—the New Zealanders were preparing a counter-attack to retake **Maleme** airfield. From the start everything seemed to go wrong. There were delays that held up the zero hour three hours. It was 3 a.m. when **20 Battalion** and **28 (Maori) Battalion** went forward. In the darkness they made headway, but as daylight showed the Germans what was happening, intense mortar and machine-gun fire, and the omnipresent **Luftwaffe**, checked the advance on the edge of the airfield and drove it back.

The attack had failed and the Germans now firmly held the airfield. But it was still an unhealthy spot, and the constantly landing Junkers bringing in more troops put down and took off with alacrity among shellbursts. Some were hit; others careered into wrecked planes or cartwheeled into craters. The alert infantry claimed some with small-arms fire. It was a rare chance for them to tackle aircraft on their own level. But the planes kept on coming.

The comings and goings at **Maleme** began a hopeful story. Perhaps because men were seen to run to some planes as they touched down, a report got about that the Germans were getting out. These men were observed to be working parties unloading stores, but the report of possible evacuation outstripped the true facts. It was carried to Headquarters New Zealand Division by Brigadier Hargest and filtered down to the troops as a rumour offering unbelievable hope. The constant stream of planes roaring up from **Maleme** and wheeling out to sea past Theodoroi Island seemed sure confirmation.

To test the story **10 Brigade** was instructed to apply pressure. Patrols were sent out and one attack was made by men of **19 Battalion** south across the valley road in the mid-afternoon, but after three hours' desultory fighting they withdrew. **Composite Battalion** did its part by

sending out patrols: to **Ay Marina** and **Stalos**, towards the **Aghya Reservoir**, and into the hills directly west of **Red Hill**. Some found Germans and exchanged unpleasantries. Others found absolutely nothing. The two patrols that went towards the reservoir were commanded by Captain Boyce and Lieutenant Dill. They met and disposed of light opposition. Except for Boyce's batman, no Supply Column men took part.

Apart from these activities, **10 Brigade** contented itself with silencing several mortar positions, shooting up some near the prison with machine guns, and blasting the **Signal Hill** position with artillery.

By the morning of this day—22 May—the Supply Column men on **Ruin Hill** were weary. They had had little sleep and had been under fire from the air and ground; lethargy hung on them, and they had to resist a desire to stretch out in a slit trench and let the heat and the pulsating throb of aircraft engines lull them to sleep. Even under attack the desire to sleep became almost overwhelming.

Snipers' bullets began to fly about during the morning from among the olive groves and the cottage close to **Ruin Hill**. The few targets that were seen were fired on promptly, and 3 Platoon in particular had good shooting that morning. One rubber-booted German, however, slipped right through the platoon, glimpsed but not tracked down.

Aircraft were left strictly alone as the **Luftwaffe** was quick to resent interference from the ground. Supply Column sent back a report on the mortar position on Observation Hill and as shellbursts mushroomed on the summit a cheer went up. The guns then turned on the prison.

There was swift retaliation: enemy mortars and an automatic firing explosive bullets began to bark, and like angry hornets six Messerschmitts whined down and sprayed everything in sight, **Ruin Hill** included, for forty-five minutes. When the strafing eased up the bombers blanketed **Wheat Hill**. Then incendiary bullets set alight ripe grain near 1 Platoon's Bren gun on **Ruin Hill**.

Petrol Company, almost next door, continued to take punishment from mortars and machine guns, and Sergeant Earl's platoon, on a flank extended to support **Petrol Company**, took the overs.

No one in Supply Column had a busier day than the group's commanding officer, Boyce, for in addition to his sortie in charge of a patrol, lack of communications made him a regular commuter between **Ruin Hill** and Battalion Headquarters.

The enemy appeared to have a fixed idea that the best way to **Galatas** was through the **Petrol Company** positions and, come hell and high water, he was going that way, for around 7 p.m., after sitting back and watching the softening-up from the air, he came forward again from the valley. He pushed up to **Pink Hill** on the verge of **Galatas**, and from **Ruin Hill** the Supply Column men could see screaming women and children fleeing in front of the Germans, who could be seen darting among the houses below the town. Divisional Cavalry, on **Petrol Company's** left flank, counter-attacked with a troop. A platoon of **19 Battalion** and a force of Greeks also attacked, and a platoon from **Composite Battalion** Headquarters cleaned up. The line was re-established, and a second **Russell Force** was formed by placing a platoon of **19 Battalion** and **Petrol Company** under Major Russell's command.

The enemy in the valley now was badly knocked about, but his movements following the attack suggested to the men on **Ruin Hill** that the German force might be moving away from the prison to behind Observation Hill. A report to this effect to **Divisional Headquarters** created an impression that an attempt was being made to cut off **5 Brigade**.

When the day was over the **Galatas** defences were intact, though the defenders were wilting. At **Maleme**, however, things had been going badly, and a withdrawal by **5 Brigade** to near **Ay Marina** was ordered. The brigade pulled back and during the morning of 23 May established a new line east of the Plataniás River. The Germans followed up and pummelled the new positions. In the **Galatas** sector adjustments were

made to meet the new situation, and patrols from **10 Brigade** linked up with patrols from **5 Brigade** to safeguard the two-mile gap now separating the two formations.

Usual straffing at dawn, but enemy and machine-gun fire quieter. Constant arrival of troop planes at **Maleme** aerodrome. Enemy presumed to be massing behind Observation Hill. Enemy reconnaissance plane landed at prison, apparently not taken during the night as ordered. Information poor. Range of enemy mortars increases. Shells landed in company reserve.

This terse summary in the Supply Column war diary eloquently expresses the situation the tired men on **Ruin Hill** faced that morning on 23 May. The day was comparatively quiet, but clearly something was brewing. The enemy was steadily moving into position on the high ground west of **10 Brigade**, and large carrying parties could be seen. The next drive must come from the west on the part of the line as yet untouched.

Most of **Composite Battalion**, in fact, had done little more than watch the war at a distance and pass the time of day dodging mortar bombs and bullets, sending a few in return. But they were tired men. The battalion now consisted of 4 RMT Company, **4 Field Regiment**, No. 2 Echelon of Supply Column, and a **5 Field Regiment** detachment. **Petrol Company** was with **Russell Force**.

On their dominating feature Supply Column men may have drawn more fire than detachments further up the line. They were, in any case, not sorry when **4 Brigade**, previously in reserve, came forward to take over **Composite Battalion's** front. The 18th Battalion relieved Supply Column—or supposedly relieved it. In actual fact, when Boyce withdrew his company from the hill between 10 p.m. and 11 p.m., the hill was virtually given over to the enemy; it seems that Lieutenant-Colonel **Gray**,³² commanding **18 Battalion**, decided to shorten his line by excluding this feature. Later, when the Germans moved onto the hill, the defences were enfiladed by their fire. Ironically enough, a Supply

Column detachment was to be one of the chief sufferers.

Cold and tired, the men of Boyce's group tramped back along a winding track behind **Wheat Hill**. In darkness they 'followed the leader' up and down hills, over walls and ditches until at last they climbed a steep track up to olive groves north-west of **Galatas**. They were now—for confusion—on **Ruin Ridge**, very close to the town. **Composite Battalion Headquarters** was in a nearby building.

During the night the situation had been changing. Fifth Brigade had taken another step back and was now behind the **Galatas** line near the village of Efthymi. Fourth Brigade faced the enemy.

Out in front of the old **Composite Battalion** defences there was movement after dawn on 24 May. The 18th Battalion could see men moving into position in the broken country to the west. In the prison valley there was considerable activity, and from **Ruin Hill** the enemy had a clear view over much of the **Galatas** defences.

Beneath their olive tree and prickly-pear plants on **Ruin Ridge** the Supply Column men began digging in as soon as there was enough light to see. After breakfast there was a chance to wash and shave, almost a novel experience by this time. But though this was a reserve area it was far from peaceful. Positions had hardly been completed before mortar bombs came down with deadly accuracy. One hit a machine-gun post among prickly pear, wounding Lieutenant Ward, Sergeant **Clarke**³³ and Corporal **Jackson**.³⁴ No. 2 Platoon came under the command of 1 Platoon.

At 9 a.m. a rude shock came. Captain Bliss had been told to take his group to reinforce the line between **Wheat** and **Pink Hills**. As it turned out the whole manoeuvre was like a punch at cotton wool—there was nothing to hit—but in its beginnings it had promise of excitement. Boyce brought back orders for a counter-attack down the slope and through the olive groves to the southern extremity of **Wheat Hill**. The men formed into an irregular line. They had rifles—though few had

bayonets—Bren guns and grenades. There was a certain amount of surprise among the men in the front line at all this activity, but the Supply Column men went forward. They had in any case worked up a battle spirit.

‘At the order to charge the “jam jugglers” surged forward, yelling and cursing and taking all obstacles in their stride, possessed of a queer, murderous enthusiasm born of the intense excitement of the moment,’ says a report by Rawle.

In the best Balaclava tradition they plunged down the slope and through the trees, alert for the slightest movement ahead. But there was no movement and no sound. Panting, they came to the end of their run and found themselves in undisputed possession of the olive grove where the **Petrol Company** had had some fierce clashes. Unburied dead sprawled in the undergrowth and equipment littered the ground.

In the advance the flanks had come unstuck: a party of Greeks was supposed to be on the left and an artillery group under Major Sprosen on the right. A party went to the right to see what could be found. They wormed their way through crops on the lip of **Wheat Hill** to have a look at **Ruin Hill**. Some machine-gunners, when told what was going on, implied that they had taken leave of their senses, and they objected strongly to the patrol moving in front of their guns to have a closer look at **Ruin Hill**. The abandonment of this feature was rankling.

An attack from the enemy was still apparently possible, and Boyce's group settled down into apprehensive idleness; the stimulus of the attack had worn off, and they were weary men again. Milk and sugar found near an olive tree were mixed with water and handed around; everyone felt better.

For the next seven and a half hours the men sat here and waited for the enemy to act, and they were not sorry when they were told to fall back. By the time an enemy attack broke against **18 Battalion** the Supply Column men were sheltering behind a stone wall flanking the

road near **Galatas**. A few overs came their way.

The clamour that could be heard from the west was the opening scene of the last act in the defence of **Galatas**. It was an act in which a small group of the Supply Column was to play an important part.

Heavy pressure had come on **18 Battalion** late that afternoon, and C Company, in the centre, was pushed off **Red Hill**. Lieutenant-Colonel Gray asked for a company to stiffen the battalion. In compliance Lieutenant MacLean's ³⁵ platoon of **4 Field Regiment** was sent from **10 Brigade** Headquarters. It was followed by most of Bliss's men: two more **4 Field Regiment** platoons and the Supply Column group, about 120 men in all, under Boyce.

As Boyce's men moved forward in the growing dark, red tracer snaked through the pale moonlight. For the men this was another follow-the-leader move to nowhere in particular. They dragged heavy feet over rough tracks and kept a bleary eye on the next man in line ahead. Fatigue hung on them and their rifles and packs dragged on their shoulders. Just how tired they were is graphically described by Farley who, in common with the others, dropped to the ground as soon as a halt was at last called.

It was not long before I was asleep, along with many others, and when I awoke I heard someone calling, 'Come on No. 2 platoon,' which was the platoon I was in. Sleepily I arose, and, fumbling about in the dark, managed to get my things together and slung on my back. By this time the head of the platoon was moving off and all I had to do was keep the rear man in sight to be with them. When a halt was called and we got together I found I was not with our platoon at all, but a No. 2 platoon from another unit. There were several other chaps from the supply unit who made the same mistake as myself.

On the face of it, these reinforcements, so tired, so untrained, were a weak reed. This, at least, appears to have been the view of Lieutenant-Colonel Gray. His opinion may have been influenced by the already

unfavourable impression the **Composite Battalion** positions had made on him when **18 Battalion** took over—trenches were too wide and too shallow and badly concealed, and wiring poor—but in the result it was an exceedingly tough reed, and certainly these drivers and gunners turned infantry could not be blamed for the final collapse in front of **Galatas**.

D Company of **18 Battalion** was still where RMT had been in the earlier days of the invasion, from the bluff inland to **Red Hill**. **Red Hill**, however, had been lost, regained and lost again during the afternoon and evening, and C Company was now back on **Murray Hill**. A Company was on **Wheat Hill**. No. 11 Platoon of B Company was wedged between D and C Companies and 10 Platoon of B Company between C and A Companies. Across the southern flank—on **Pink Hill** and across the road south of **Galatas**—was **Russell Force**, consisting of Divisional Cavalry, **Petrol Company** and a **4 Field Regiment** platoon.

The reinforcements were to be fitted into **18 Battalion's** defence line. At a track junction they were split up, some men in the confusion going astray. Sixteen men of 1 Platoon of Boyce's depleted group were given two Bren guns and all the digging tools and set the task of improving old **Welch Regiment** trenches on **Murray Hill**. The rest, under Boyce, were redispersed by Bliss in support of **18 Battalion**, left centre.

Rawle led the sixteen men up through vineyards to the hilltop where, in the light of the insipid moon, they began hacking at stubborn rock. The trenches were lined along the hump of the feature, and the working men may have sensed the menace from the darkness to the west. As they swung their picks, there was movement nearby as Corporal **Mitchell** ³⁶ and about ten men of 11 Platoon **18 Battalion** brought up another Bren gun and set about siting it in the trench on the right. Another early morning arrival—about 3 a.m.—was Sergeant **Bradshaw**, ³⁷ of **27 (Machine Gun) Battalion**, with a section of seven men. With his Vickers, minus tripod, Bradshaw had been in action in various parts of the front and had been detailed to assist Rawle's detachment.

By the time the moon was set, the only appreciable inroad that had been made was the removal of a soft upper stratum in one trench, enabling one Bren gun to be set up. Elsewhere, the trenches remained shallow, but the best had to be made of them. Branches, grass and wheatstalks were woven into camouflage both for the guns and the men's headdress—rolled balaclavas—and as the first light of Sunday 25 May came into the sky the men were in position and watching for the anticipated attack.

On the extreme left was a Bren gun manned by Drivers **Cox**³⁸ and **Gibbs**.³⁹ To the right of this was another trench, then a fig tree, by which the Vickers had been set up on an ammunition box. To the right again was a long trench in which the second Bren, manned by Driver **Le Compte** and Lance-Corporal **Langdon**,⁴⁰ was set up. In the fourth trench, on the extreme right, was the **18 Battalion** Bren. Two fig trees just to the north of this marked where the ground fell away sharply to D Company's positions. To the south the hump of the hill fell away more gradually to C Company's positions. There were some 11 Platoon men in the vines down this slope.

As the sun came up behind them the men on **Murray Hill** looked across a gully to **Red Hill**, about 400 yards away. Half left from their position and almost due south of **Red Hill** was a small feature on which there was a grove. In the saddle between the two was a vineyard. Further south still was the familiar shape of **Ruin Hill**, now in enemy hands. The assignment of the men on **Murray Hill** was to keep the enemy off **Red Hill**, which was slightly higher than their position, and to stop him coming through the grove and the vineyard to the south. They were to hang on at all costs. Information, water and rations had been promised at dawn but had not arrived.

Strafing planes were spitting viciously all along the front, but on the ground the enemy kept out of sight. Somewhere behind the curtain of trees and vines and beyond the blind ridge of the hill the Germans were deploying and moving up, but the sun was high before the first trace of

movement could be seen from **Murray Hill**. About 8 a.m. the first heads showed on the crest of **Red Hill**, and the first impetuous bursts from Brens and Vickers stuttered across the valley.

There was a broad, deep sangar on top of **Red Hill** built up with loose rocks. At one point there was a niche through which men could peer, but Bradshaw had been there the previous day and knew where to shoot. So whenever curious German eyes sought to look across to the New Zealand line they met a stream of lead. Observing with binoculars from near the fig tree on the right, Corporal Starkey, of Supply Column, kept the machine-gunners posted as their shots went home.

About 9 a.m. mortar bombs and shells came down along the whole front. The battle was stirring to life, and from its iron throat came a blast of sound; guttural booming, staccato crackling, thunderclap banging, all tumbled together with howling aircraft engines into a powerful surge of noise that enveloped and dulled the senses.

And what the senses of these men recorded is all that is left for us to know. Certain things are established and reasonably certain; broad outlines are clear. But who did precisely what, and when, are imponderables that no one can ever know—and those who think they do know will never agree. It is possible to bring out of battle a connected story, provided there is a boldly defined chain of events to impress the mind, but here on a hilltop, huddled in trenches and immersed in confusion and racket, there was nothing so tidy as that. Certain things were close and real: noise, fear, smoke, heat, dust, sweat, the smell of burned cordite. These were immediate, forceful, inescapable. For the rest, there were snap impressions, linked together in some vague way: figures moving and coming closer; men bleeding, falling; other men moving about with an apparent plan in an apparently planless maze. There was no time, only the present. The last second was gone, the next might never come. For the man in the trench the whole of creation centred around a jittering Bren gun or a jerking rifle, and obscure figures down among the trees.



Mount Olympus from above the camp north of Katerini

Mount Olympus from above the camp north of Katerini



Field Supply Depot south of Olympus

Field Supply Depot south of Olympus



Livadhion, a village above Ay Dhimitrios, where potatoes were bought for the Division by Supply Column

Livadhion, a village above Ay Dhimitrios, where potatoes were bought for the Division by Supply Column



Village belles, Tricola, near Salonika

Village belles, Tricola, near Salonika



Supply Column camp area
south of Elasson

Supply Column camp area south of *Elasson*



Cookhouse at Atalandi on
20 April 1941—Driver R.
Eastwick standing

Cookhouse at *Atalandi* on 20 April 1941—Driver R. Eastwick standing



On the *Thurland Castle* after evacuation from Greece

On the *Thurland Castle* after evacuation from Greece



Approach to Kea Island early on the morning of 25 April
Approach to **Kea Island** early on the morning of 25 April

These figures were working forward, and as the morning progressed spandaus began to hammer at the ridge from close at hand, and rifles cracked from among the groves. Bullets snicking through the vines on the left bowled over some **18 Battalion men, and a sergeant-major brought the rest of the men closer in to the detachment's left flank.**

At every observed movement across the valley the machine guns chattered. Cox by midday had shot his way through a box of ammunition—1000 rounds.

Though many men were too busy to see it, there was one brief, heart-lifting incident early in the afternoon. Like a vision, six Blenheims in neat formation, their red, white and blue **RAF roundels showing clearly, droned by in a sort of vacuum; a moment before the air had been full of wings with black crosses, but now these six flew overhead in a clear sky, coming from the direction of **Maleme** and heading towards **Suda**. Tired eyes followed them, half joyfully, half wistfully.**

To the west there were Germans everywhere, from the coast, along the ridges and down to the prison valley. While they gathered for the assault, the mortars and machine guns directed fire at the New Zealanders, and in the early afternoon steel splinters and lead were flying freely about **Murray Hill. A mortar bomb burst near the centre Bren gun, shell-shocking Langdon. Le Compte took him out at great**

risk.

The crest of **Red Hill** had been kept clear, but behind it the Germans were forming up. D Company, on the right, took the worst of it and for an hour fought furiously. In the south A Company and the troopers and drivers held their ground. At 3 p.m. a lull settled.

In this lull Farley, in a reserve position behind C Company and thoroughly tired of crouching and hiding, took an excursion to the front line. He says:

Away to my right, and well out in front of our line were many figures. These I took to be patrolling parties from our side, though I could not be sure. The men were moving in different directions, some coming towards me, others going towards the German line. There were two figures very noticeable on their own because they were crossing an open wheat or rye paddock. The enemy must have seen them, too, but he was not uncertain, for the next minute a mortar bomb plopped by them. When they dropped a tree in the line of vision hid them from view. I only saw one reappear afterwards.

But the lull was only comparative, for **Murray Hill** was still lively, and about 3.15 p.m. a bullet furrowed Rawle's skull and he went down. For a while he looked convincingly dead, particularly to men who could only spare a glance from their work. Still working on their original orders to hang on at all costs, they kept at their guns and rifles, and were agreeably surprised soon afterwards to find him, head bandaged, with them again.

Fire was pouring in from **Ruin Hill** and from points to the southwest, and though **Red Hill** had been made too hot for Jerry, there was a lot of movement in the grove and the vineyard. A runner was killed, and attempts to make contact with Battalion Headquarters failed.

Things began to go wrong. A brisk wind from the sea swept up over the hot rock of **Murray Hill** and tore away camouflage. Mortars or

incendiaries set fire to scrub around the central fig tree. Then two Brens went out of action: Cox's (on the left) had a stoppage and Mitchell's (on the right) was permanently wrecked by a mortar bomb.

The Germans grasped the opportunity to set up a machine gun on **Red Hill**. Cox cleared his gun and in five minutes his bullets had sought out and accounted for both this and another machine gun in the grove.

Opposite the **18 Battalion** front—from the sea to **Wheat Hill**—were two enemy groups: the *Assault Regiment* against C and D Companies and a battalion of *100 Mountain Regiment* against A Company and the **4 Field Regiment** detachment. There was a second battalion of *100 Mountain Regiment* in the prison valley to attack the southern curve of the line. Remnants of *3 Parachute Regiment* were between the prison and **Perivolia**, and two battalions of *85 Mountain Regiment* were brought against **8 Greek Regiment** at **Alikianou**.

The mortar barrage was working up to a fury, and to the north screaming Stukas could be seen plunging on D Company. About 4 p.m. the enemy came out of the olive trees on each side of **Red Hill** and jabbed at either flank of **Murray Hill**. They came towards D Company in a solid wave, ignoring the bullets whipping through their ranks. Bradshaw, behind his Vickers, became aware that there was a movement en masse to the east. At first it was difficult to sort friend from foe; everyone seemed to be running at full pelt. Then, as he sorted them out, he fired at the enemy as hard as he could.

About this time what is described as the first message of the day came through, but it was more likely a report from Starkey, still spotting on the right. It simply said that ‘**18 Battalion** on our right’ had surrendered. The next message, passed from mouth to mouth, was for the **18 Battalion** men on the hill to fix bayonets and prepare to counter-attack under the covering fire of the ASC men. ‘This was later washed out, but I admired the way the men of the 18th got ready to do their stuff,’ says Driver **Philipson**,⁴¹ of Supply Column.

To the south the line was cracking also. A Company, on **Wheat Hill**, under intense fire from **Ruin Hill**, was forced back through **Galatas**. C Company, with exposed flanks, was ordered to withdraw.

The attack was now swirling around **Murray Hill** like an incoming tide. On either flank the infantry was falling back. Men in reserve gathered up their equipment and took to their heels when they heard breathless warnings. Everywhere there was a note of urgency, everywhere men in a hurry. Farley says:

I ran up to the hedge line and retrieved my pack. Had my rifle and ammo already on. Away we tore, hell for leather. Never even took time to slip my pack on properly but just carried it on one strap. As I beat it down the track there were men running before me. Every possie I passed was well cleared out.... I panted up the slope towards **Galatas**, getting near winded with my pack and rifle becoming near a ton weight: I had passed many articles of discarded gear and decided to get rid of my pack. I placed it by the side of the track and memorised the place as I thought I would pick it up later. Instead of going straight up into **Galatas** we made a left turn and went along a sunken pathway until we were on the seaward side of the village. Then, by various tracks we made for the top of the ridge and so to the road and shelter. But the face of the ridge was absolutely peppered with bullets from rifles and machine-guns, and from the latter they were explosive ones. The sun was well towards the west, and from the angle it was shining it showed up the trail of nearly every bullet—made a silvery trail of smoke.

So far the climb had been among trees and huge cactus bushes and below firing level, but now we had come up to the level of this lead barrage and there was a clear strip to cross to gain the shelter of the eastern side of the ridge. It was into this strip that most of the bullets were driving. I waited a few moments and mapped out a course: south under cover, here and there, of cactus bushes for about three chains, then turn left and make straight through to the road using the few olive trees as cover. The distance across the danger zone would be about 100

to 125 yards.

I made it. Others had gone before me and made it except one. He had got half way across and stopped a slug. He was on his knees with blood pouring from his mouth and nose. Ahead of him by some 20 yards was apparently his mate, who had turned and seen his plight. He seemed undecided whether he should turn back. The wounded one waved him on weakly.

Once the road was made I was able to breathe a little more easily. There was quite a gathering of men on the road and below it, most of them Supply Column chaps, including an officer who was wounded but who was still able to carry on. After a few minutes confab we decided to keep across open country. Nobody knew where we were going, so it was a sort of every man for himself affair.

But they were still not out of trouble, for mortars burst about them 'with a shattering wham. It was like a charge across no-man's-land.' And so the mad rush went on, harassed by mortars and aircraft.

On **Murray Hill** Rawle's men were fighting it out. Precariously placed on an insecure salient, they were fighting still on their first orders—'Hold out at all costs'—unaware that a heavy Stuka raid on **Galatas** about 4 p.m. had broken all communications and that their chances of hearing a withdrawal order were remote. At 4.30 p.m. the enemy turned his attention to the troublesome hill. Mortar bombs and bullets showered in from three directions: front, right and rear. At 5 p.m. a strong formation began to close in from **Ruin Hill**. Cox swung his gun to meet the straggling line of men, and in so doing exposed himself to fire from **Red Hill**. He was pounding away when a bullet caught him between the eyes. As he fell dead, **Gibbs** took over.

The enemy was pressing close and stick bombs were flying in from the left and bursting in the central trench. How long this furious battle kept up is hard to determine. Eventually a runner came through from the rear holding a white-lined British warm in front of him. The enemy

presumably took this to be a white flag, for fire eased appreciably, but as the runner threw himself flat on the hilltop, the hammering began again. The runner jerked out to Bradshaw, 'You're to get out if you can.' Bradshaw passed the word down, and Rawle, his face white and his head bandaged, appeared and asked, 'What's going on?' Bradshaw told him, and the retirement began. As the men jumped up and dashed for cover, Bradshaw and **Gibbs** stayed at their guns. One or two men fell.

Gibbs was pounding away on the left, with bullets whipping about and the Germans advancing up the hill.

Bradshaw's gun was still stuttering when he turned to find three Germans spraying into the trench with tommy guns. With two other survivors of 27 Battalion he was taken away a prisoner. When they were taken beyond **Red Hill** they saw to their satisfaction that the ground was liberally littered with German dead. Their sweeping of **Red Hill** had been effective.

The others who had gone back had crawled off **Murray Hill** on their bellies through grape vines with bullets plunking around them and Germans only fifteen feet away. They reached the shelter of a low stone wall, then made an S movement through German detachments to the old Battalion Headquarters area. They finally reached a deep gully, where they met Bliss and were guided back to **Ruin Ridge** ahead of the German advance.

The detachment suffered 50 per cent casualties on the ridge. There had been further casualties on the way out, and at least four men, one of whom was wounded, surrendered.

For his leadership during the battle and for his skilful extrication of the detachment, Rawle was awarded the MC. **Gibbs**, for his covering action and for his consistently steady behaviour during the campaign, was awarded the MM.

The German advance was now rolling forward. In the south **Petrol Company**, Divisional Cavalry and the **4 Field Regiment** men were

holding, but around **Galatas** resistance was crumbling.

The RMT group, in reserve on **Ruin Ridge**, was told to hold, and while **18 Battalion** stragglers streamed back through their lines, these men stood their ground. Fire was coming in from three directions. News came that Major Lewis's ⁴² headquarters had gone, and the RMT group, too, withdrew. There then remained only two companies of **20 Battalion**. They were in good order and stood firm. The 23rd Battalion came up, and the **20 Battalion** companies were pulled back to form a line from the coast to **Galatas**.

Meanwhile, east of **Galatas** a force was accumulating on **Church Hill** from the bits and pieces of **18 Battalion** and **Composite Battalion**. Some men, however, were scrambling back hot foot, and were not to be stopped.

That night the various detachments of **Composite Battalion** made their way back to Transit Camp A to reorganise and prepare to fight again. However, already dispersed in various positions when the German assault began, the different parts of the battalion were never able, in the confused situation, to pull themselves completely together again, and some men who had joined the mad stampede were roaming without orders or without any idea of what they should do.

Between the coast and **Galatas** the enemy's way was barred by two companies of **20 Battalion**. South of **Galatas** Divisional Cavalry, **Petrol Company** and the **4 Field Regiment** group drew back before the Germans entered **Galatas** in force.

The German intention was to form on a line running from the hospital, just east of **Galatas**, through **Cemetery Hill**, and then to the south-west. Two battalions of *100 Mountain Regiment* advanced on **Galatas**, one from the west, past Wheat and Ruin Hills, and one from the prison valley to the south-west. Along the coast the drive—if it could now be called a drive here—was made by the dog-tired remnants of the *Assault Regiment*, which halted roughly on the line C and D Companies

of **18 Battalion** had occupied in the morning.

The critical point was **Galatas**. There seemed a very real danger that the Germans were coming on. The New Zealanders' reaction was firm and decisive.

Two light British tanks came out of **Galatas** with a report that it was full of Germans, and they offered to go back if they were given a machine-gunner and a driver to replace casualties. These were supplied by the New Zealanders, and under the orders of **Colonel Kippenberger**, two companies of **23 Battalion**, parties of 18 and 20 Battalions and men from other units formed up for a counter-attack. As the light faded and flares began to sprout up from **Galatas**, the line moved forward, and in a hectic twenty minutes' fight swept through the village. Whether or not the attack achieved what was intended, it certainly left the Germans in a more sober and cautious mood and prompted a request from *100 Mountain Regiment* that the next forward movement should not begin until about 3 p.m. as **Galatas** was not completely clear.

The New Zealand units were now very much the worse for wear. The battalions of **4 Brigade** were depleted and, except for **19 Battalion**, split into separate detachments. Most of **5 Brigade** had been out of the line for a few hours but got little rest, and three battalions, 21, 22 and 23, were whittled down to weary survivors; only **28 (Maori) Battalion** and the Engineer Detachment had escaped heavy losses. **Composite Battalion** was out of the running, and Divisional Cavalry joined **21 Battalion** on 26 May. Apart from Divisional Cavalry, few of these amateur infantrymen took any further organised part in the fighting.

The new defence line extended from **7 British General Hospital** to the right of **19 Australian Brigade**. The 21st Battalion was to be on the right, **19 Battalion**, the strongest of the **4 Brigade** battalions, in the centre, and **28 Battalion** on the left.

When Boyce and his men fell back, they were placed in a position beyond the area where Hook's company had first camped. Hook's

company was close by but still inactive. Throughout the day the men of No. 1 Echelon group had listened to the sound of enemy mortaring and machine-gunning coming closer. A patrol was sent out to contact the Marines, who were supposed to be on the group's left flank. They had vanished, leaving the flank open. So, while the battle drew closer, the company sat and waited.

Boyce's wounded joined the interminable queue at the crowded dressing station near **Canea**; Rawle and his wounded went back to an RAP for dressings. On his return he found that Boyce and Hook, acting on instructions, had moved further to the rear. His plight was shared by other wounded of Supply Column who were still awaiting attention when their unit moved.

The order to Boyce, which came from Force Headquarters about midnight, was to move to an assembly point south of **Suda Bay**. As the group moved through the darkness, desultory shots were heard from the coast, and fears were entertained for the safety of the wounded still at **Canea**. Men from the dressing station overtook the Column next day, weaving their way en route through the **Luftwaffe**'s bombing of the groves between **Galatas** and **Canea**. When the trek across the island to **Sfakia** began, however, the Column was still split up, and in its various parts joined the rag-tag and bob-tail migration over **Crete**.

The move to **Sfakia** on the south coast of **Crete** began on the night of 26–27 May in all the confusion implied by the situation. To begin with, **Composite Battalion**, although largely reassembled, was lost as far as **4 Brigade** Headquarters was concerned. Split up to suit the requirements of the fighting on 25 May, the battalion had been unable to reform immediately on withdrawal, and the groups did whatever the various officers who were doing their best to control troop movements told them to do—or they did what seemed best. There was, however, a general trend towards the transit camp, and during 26 May most of the detachments arrived there. By the end of that morning most of the battalion's survivors had assembled, but there were odd groups, among them Supply Column men, who were still wandering, and there were

others who had attached themselves to 19 and 21 Battalions, which were in the line fighting

Colonel Kippenberger spent some hours during that day trying to find **Composite Battalion**, without success. During the afternoon he was placed in command of **4 Brigade** when **Brigadier Inglis** ⁴³ was instructed by Force Headquarters to take over a new brigade of British troops. About midday Colonel Gray and Major Lewis reported to him, and Lewis said he thought he knew where most of the battalion was. **Colonel Kippenberger** instructed him to assemble the unit at what appeared to be a monastery, which he could see between **Canea** and **Suda Bay**. Lewis went away and did not return. Runners who were sent to the monastery by **Kippenberger** about mid-afternoon reported that they could find no one there.

The 18th Battalion and **Composite Battalion**, in fact, instead of going to the monastery were moving eastwards on orders from **Divisional Headquarters**, confirmed en route by **General Freyberg**.

Feeling, perhaps, that the defence against them was cracking, the Germans chose this day to launch the heaviest air assault of the campaign, inflicting greater casualties among the New Zealanders than on any other day. And the base troops from **Suda**, poorly disciplined and panicstricken, chose this day to flood onto the roads. In this chaotic situation, Colonel Gray was able to hold together a core of **18 Battalion**, but **Composite Battalion** had little chance of retaining cohesion and broke up. The morale of the **Composite Battalion** men, however, was by no means broken.

The plan now was to use **Sfakia** as an embarkation point, but the men, and indeed many officers, at first had no idea what was going on. A clue had been given the previous day, however, when **General Freyberg** sent trucks to explore the possibility of using **Sfakia** for evacuation. Base troops correctly guessed the meaning of this movement, and like water in a porous pot the story seeped out. This was the most some people ever knew—and there were some who were trying to lead men who

did not even know this much.

‘Information was difficult to obtain; no one seemed to have any knowledge of our ultimate destination,’ said Second-Lieutenant Hastie describing the withdrawal of Hook's group. ‘It was simply a case of the blind leading the blind.’

‘The lack of orders and communications was astounding,’ wrote Captain Jacobs in a report on 15 June after his return to [Egypt](#). ‘Actually I was shown by ADMS Suda Area the force order for evacuation, but that was just luck, and I have not met any NZASC personnel since who saw it.’

Looking back on it, the absence of orders and communications would hardly appear astounding, but the fact that they seemed so at the time—or at any rate, immediately afterwards—is an indication that morale was high enough to expect such everyday amenities.

So while 4 and 5 Brigades and [19 Australian Brigade](#) fell back, a procession that must be one of the most oddly assorted of any retreat in the war was set in motion over 35 miles of winding mountain roads and tracks. Along with the New Zealanders jostled Greek civilians with donkey carts, Greek troops, Cretan peasants, [Royal Marines](#), Commandos, Australians, [RAF](#) men and Cypriots. Among the mob were observed three women in battle dress. The straggling column wound up through a burning village, round spurs and into valleys of the [White Mountains](#), through the Asifou Plain and down the far side towards [Sfakia](#).

Most or all of the Supply Column men seem to have joined the trek on the first night. This includes the men of the DID, who on this night got themselves awheel and drove into the mountains. But they were not just fleeing pell-mell. They still had a job to do, and they did it.

They had been doing it, in fact, right through the campaign, though not entirely with success. [Crete](#) is not a campaign supply men would

care to hold up as a model of supply operations, but it is a campaign from which lessons can be drawn. From all the difficulties of the situation, two stand out as primary factors in preventing the efficient distribution of food: lack of information and lack of suitable rations.

In the circumstances lack of information was understandable, but it immensely complicated the work of delivering rations, particularly under cover of night. Supply Column was the only organisation that could give the troops the food they needed to keep them going, yet it was not kept informed of new locations of units when they were shuffled about. Supply Column men did their best, but 'Men to whose units I delivered rations say they never received them, yet I took them to where I was instructed,' reported Corporal **Palairret**.⁴⁴ Some men went almost a week without food.

The type of ration that would have been of immense value on **Crete** was a compact battle ration, similar to the American type seen later in the war. Rations involving cooking on a fire or in an oven were useless in these conditions, and their bulk was an embarrassment. Packaged rations would have enabled units to carry several days' food without much inconvenience.

To add to the supply troubles, **4 Brigade** lost its supply officer, **Jacobs**. The brigade moved on the night of 25–26 May while he was absent, and like others who were anxious to track it down, he was unable to find it. He joined up the next day with the DID.

In general the supply position was about as difficult as it could be. In the first bombing raid an attached driver, **Derrett**,⁴⁵ was killed. As the stick of bombs fell straight through the depot, a bomb skidded along the ground. Derrett, sheltering behind a tree, stood up apparently to have a closer look; at that instant the bomb exploded.

Later, overs from the **Galatas** battle came zipping through the DID. In the circumstances serving the odd men who came along during the day looking for rations became a grim game of running the gauntlet—

and during the last days there was a flood of hungry men in search of food. Dashing across the open from dump to dump, Supply Column men frequently risked their lives to serve these men. Corporals **McAra** ⁴⁶ and **Rutherford**, ⁴⁷ particularly, showed courage in carrying out their work.

There were narrow escapes but only the one fatality. McIndoe was talking to a unit quartermaster one day when a bullet snicked between them and half tore away the patch pocket on the QM's pants. On another occasion a bomb burst right beside a slit trench where five New Zealanders who had come for rations were sheltering. They emerged, yellow with dust but unhurt.

One bright spot in the tedious and often hectic daylight hours was provided by Captain Butterfield, who was to be seen brewing up and taking tea around to men in the midst of air raids.

At 5 p.m. on 26 May, Major **Davis** ⁴⁸ of **Divisional Headquarters** came to the DID with orders to load five trucks with rations in preparation for a move to a rest area east of **Suda Bay**. As the trucks were pulling out six hours later an SOS was received from 28 Battalion for a truck to carry its wounded, so one was sent down the prison road, where the Maoris had been fighting at the southern end of the New Zealand line.

The other trucks went on, and while bypassing **Canea** by a back road, the leading vehicle bogged down in a water-filled bomb crater. The second truck dragged it backwards, and the hole was filled sufficiently to allow the vehicles to pass. Following up later, the detached truck with 28 Battalion wounded ran foul of the same crater and was unable to get out. Both wounded and rations were lost to the enemy. The driver later turned up at **Sfakia**.

The 27th May was spent by the junction of the SudaRetimo- **Sfakia** roads. That night, with weary troops clinging all over the trucks like flies, they drove on southwards to a village half-way to **Sfakia**; trucks were dispersed, and the men took to the hills. On returning they found that most of the rations had been taken by **4 Brigade** and other fighting

troops in the area. After serving walking wounded, the Supply Column men issued the remaining rations to anyone who was hungry. The trucks were driven on to the end of the road, where orders were received to scrap them.

This DID group was the last of Supply Column to hang together in a disciplined organisation. Padding across the island on weary feet, the rest of the Supply Column men were just part of the mob. Air attacks broke up groups, and the less swift were left behind. A graphic picture of what happened is given by Farley. Writing of 27 May, he relates how German planes probed about for the concealed, resting men. Farley himself spent most of the raid skipping from one side of a stone wall to the other, depending on the direction from which the planes were approaching. A friend was clinging to an endless chain of buckets down a well, and other men nearby were crouching beneath a bridge, oblivious to the water swirling around them.

While the strafing was at its height, a racket of bullets, mortars and shells exploding had started up about a quarter of a mile away. It sounded as though the two sides were having a set to. Even the sky was obscured, and my first thought was that parachutists had been dropped to cut off our retreat.... I saw a column of smoke drifting overhead, then smelt burning rubber. This was merely a lorry load of ammo set on fire.

Impatient to be moving, the men were crowding onto the road long before dark—dusk was 8 p.m.—and the faster walkers were pushing past the slower and more tired.

In the centre of the village there was a divergence of roads (Farley continues). An order had been passed back that no troops were to pass through the village until eight o'clock, with the result that between the bridge and the crossroads—about quarter of a mile—there was a good gathering of soldiers. If an enemy plane was seen, the warning, 'Aircraft!' was to be given by word of mouth or by the blowing of a whistle. Nerves were at a high pitch, and suddenly someone cried 'Aircraft!' and there was an immediate panic. The first into cover yelled

for the rest to stand still but their cries were not heeded until all had found some sort of concealment.

No plane came, but this hysterical scatter served a good purpose by dispersing the crowded men. They were back on the road before time, however.

On entering the village we found an officer had taken up point duty and was directing, or trying to direct, the men. Apparently New Zealanders and Australians were to go one road, and English units another, but he had a hopeless task. Everyone was asking questions at the same time and arguing the point among themselves about which was the right way, while others carried on regardless of the officer's instructions. The officer threw up his hands in despair and guided only those who would listen to him.

While Farley was trying to hear above the babble of noise what the officer was saying, a Supply Column officer came along and got his instructions. Farley followed him,...but the pace became too hot for me and for many others, so we gradually dropped back to make our own pace. Many of us were beginning to look sorry sights. It was five days since I had had a shave, my trousers had given in the seam and were open from the calf to half way up the thigh on the inner side, and the boots of some men were falling apart.

Every now and then we had to get off the road and let motor traffic through. These were mainly lorries carrying wounded who were unable to walk; wounded who could walk had to do so. The trucks were full to overflowing, for when drivers had to slow down near groups of men they seized the opportunity to clamber aboard until the trucks would hold no more.

The footsore march went on. At each rest there was an almost overpowering desire to fall down and sleep. At last 'breasting the top of a hill we could see a bright fire burning. The route took us closer until we entered a village. Everywhere were signs of bombing, and the fire we had

seen was one of the largest buildings burning. By this time it was a smouldering shell.' Beyond the village a parachute flare glowed and glared down, and everyone froze until it had burned out.

Water bottles were getting low. At some wells there were orderly queues, but at others

...each in his turn cursed and chafed at the delay, to say nothing of the jostling and pushing that was done. Animosity towards different countries sprang up. The New Zealanders cursed the Englishmen, the Englishmen cursed the New Zealanders, and the combined efforts of both were directed towards the Cypriots and Greeks, who were in a minority but who were much to the fore in undisciplined actions. God knows, our discipline left a lot to be desired, most of us acting like starving wolves. The Cypriots had no idea of taking their turn, but just pushed in and to hell with the rest.

Next day Farley and his companions grew tired of the delay involved in hiding from aircraft, which on this day seemed to be quiet, and they went on.

It was our first chance to look around as we travelled. What a trail! There was discarded gear everywhere: clips of cartridges, loose rounds, web gear, broken and dismantled rifles, cases of rifle ammo, photos, letters, overcoats and lord knows what. Now and then we passed an army truck which had been run off the road and over the bank.

After a hot, dusty climb the men came in sight of the [Askifou Plain](#), a basin less than a mile across in the mountains. 'Below us lay a pretty, fertile basin, as green as an oasis. It was surrounded by rocky hills, with the road winding its way to the bottom, skirting the western edge and then disappearing away to the south.... The basin was a parched man's paradise, for there were wells everywhere.'

At 8 p.m. that day Farley and his friends reached a control point and, like thousands of others, became 'organised' for the final leg of the journey.

The road to **Sfakia** came to an end on the brink of a 500-foot high escarpment, and from this point the beach was reached by a goat track. The beach was too small for assembly, and the climb from the beach to the road took two hours. The complications this added to an already difficult evacuation were enormous, and to check confusion a rigid control system filtered the men approaching the port.

The policy was to take off organised groups first and give detached groups and individuals second preference—which in practice meant that many of them stayed on the island. This was a bitter blow at the end of a bitter campaign. These scattered groups of gunners and drivers had done their share of fighting and had earned qualification for inclusion among the fighting troops. The priorities, fixed by Force Headquarters, did them an unwitting injustice. The overriding need was to preserve the main fighting units intact and thus save the force from destruction. In the case of New Zealand Division the loss of, say, a brigade would have been a major disaster.

But though quite convincing as a theory, in practice the evacuation of troops worked out rather differently. The policy so restricted movement to the beach that boats had to put out with room to spare. On the first night, when all priorities had been fulfilled, the Navy was appealing for, 'Anyone else?' and in the end had to leave with partly filled ships.

However, the wanderers and stragglers were not entirely ignored. In the hills groups of fifty or so were organised and placed under the charge of officers, and in this way Supply Column men, though not belonging to any major formation, were taken off the first night (28–29 May) and the following night.

Control officers had no easy task. They were to organise into orderly groups hundreds of men who all wanted to be first. Here again Farley gives a vivid picture:

When evening approached there was a general movement for the road. This time we were put into batches of 50 and sent on. About a mile further in we came to a large U-shaped turn. Here were accumulated hundreds of soldiers; they covered the sides and bottom of the gully that ran into the bottom of the U, and the roadway itself was one hell of a mix-up of soldiers trying to get or be put into some sort of organisation by a very exasperated senior officer.

The trouble was that every man wanted to be first away as this was supposed to be the last stage to the boat, and nobody wanted to miss the first night off. The result was that when a call was made for 50 men, 200 tried to get in. Finally the officer drew his revolver and threatened to shoot any man trying to create panic and disobeying orders.

....At last we were heading for the boat. The road was now on a down grade, and the going was much easier as we were on a bitumen surface in the cool of late evening. Numerous vehicles passed us, travelling the opposite way. We made a halt on a large bend. The party ahead could be heard right below us, and we could hear the roar of several trucks working uphill in low gear. Apparently some vehicle was in trouble, for the sound of engines finally died out, and voices and the sound of tinkering with vehicles could be heard below us. Half an hour passed, then an hour. Two hours went by. This was past being a good thing and we were growing restless at the long delay. It must have been two and a half hours before we got going again. After marching a bit we came to what was evidently the cause of the delay. The road ended abruptly. It appears that the engineers had been extending the road down the hill and had been interrupted in their task before its completion. From here on was a mere donkey track, and the narrowing of the route meant a straggling out of the men. It also seems that most men were not sure of the way.

While these troops were scrambling as fast as they could to safety, others were making a fighting withdrawal across the island. Originally it had been planned to keep **Suda open by relieving **5 Brigade** with a newly**

formed British brigade, consisting of 1 Welch, 1 **Rangers** and **Northumberland Hussars**, which was to be commanded by **Brigadier Inglis**. On the night this was supposed to happen (26–27 May) a criss-cross of messages and orders prevented coordination of the move, and as the New Zealanders and Australians stepped back, the new brigade stepped forward into the enemy's arms.

Fifth Brigade, with **19 Battalion**, A Company **20 Battalion**, the Divisional Cavalry detachment, and **7 Field Company** under command, took a new line across 42nd Street, with the Australians to the north. A bayonet charge here sent the enemy back a mile and a half. There was serious danger, however, from a strong force making an outflanking move with mule trains to the south.

That night, the 27th–28th, **5 Brigade** and **19 Australian Brigade** moved back to **Stilos**, then withdrew back through a battalion of **Layforce**—a Commando formation which had only recently arrived in **Crete**. The **2/8 Australian Battalion** and some members of **5 Brigade** Headquarters made a stand later that day at Babali Hani. On this same day **4 Brigade** was perched in positions up on the **Askifou Plain** to guard against parachute landings.

On 29 May the main force was clustered in the **Askifou Plain**. That night **4 Brigade** moved down towards the beach; **5 Brigade** was already in the lying-up area. While **5 Brigade** waited its turn, **4 Brigade** was taken off on the night of 30–31 May.

On this night Supply Column performed its final service on **Crete**. The only food dump from which troops could be supplied was a depot of sorts at the beach itself, a most unsatisfactory location as everything taken back to the troops had to be manhandled up the winding track.

Captain Jacobs first became aware of this depot when he met Lieutenant Hastie early on the morning of 30 May. The food, which included tinned meat and biscuits in quantity, was stored in an old warehouse, part single and part two-storied, near the landing. The

Australian depot keepers, about three of them, had had no orders for a week.

Jacobs told Colonel Gray about the dump and was told to collect volunteers to carry back whatever could be sent to the rearguard troops. No particular unit was specified, and Jacobs assumed Gray meant **5 Brigade**, but **19 Australian Brigade** was also in the line suffering from a shortage of rations and water.

The Australians willingly surrendered their dump to Jacobs, who set about organising the most primitive transport service in Supply Column's history. At midnight a volunteer party of Australians and men from Force Headquarters paraded; they had nothing to carry rations in, so stuffed their shirts full, leaving their hands free for climbing. But few of them had the strength left to complete the journey up the track—and some men went straight off to the cave area with their loads. Of 1400 tins of meat taken away that night, only 400 reached the troops in the line above **Sfakia**.

On 31 May some 10,000 troops still awaited evacuation, Supply Column men among them; those Supply Column men who escaped from **Crete** seem to have got away on the first two nights in organised parties. Those now remaining were mainly stragglers.

The Navy could not do a great deal more, and on the night of 31 May-1 June ships came in for the last lift. They reached **Sfakia** soon after midnight, and when they pulled out again at 3 a.m. on 1 June there were 4000 men on board, mainly **5 Brigade** and the rest of **4 Brigade**. They were watched from the beach by the forlorn remnants. About an hour later those on the beach were told to surrender and hoist the white flag as a sign that arms had been laid down. Others who had been further back from the beach when the last boat pulled away merely heard, 'No more for tonight.' Later they heard the bitter news, 'We are capitulating. The boats are not coming back.'

¹ **Sgt R. D. Munro; Timaru; born Timaru, 13 Dec 1911; butcher.**

² **Capt J. M. R. Julian; Wellington; born Hawera, 13 Mar 1913; motor mechanic.**

³ **Capt J. B. McKenzie; born NZ, 8 Aug 1912; stock agent; p.w. 17 Jun 1941.**

⁴ **Capt J. P. Hunter; Hamilton; born Auckland, 20 Aug 1912; clerk; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.**

⁵ **2 Lt D. J. Henshaw; born NZ, 20 Mar 1909; grocer; killed in action 20 May 1941.**

⁶ **Capt L. A. Radford; Maeroa, Hamilton; born Hamilton, 19 Aug 1910; machinist.**

⁷ **WO II F. R. Earl; Wellington; born Lumsden, 12 Feb 1905; engine driver; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.**

⁸ **Lt-Gen Sir Edward Puttick, KCB, DSO and bar, m.i.d., MC (Greek), Legion of Merit (US); Wellington; born Timaru, 26 Jun 1890; Regular soldier; NZ Rifle Brigade 1914–19 (CO 3 Bn); comd 4 Bde Jan 1940-Aug 1941; NZ Div (Crete) 29 Apr-27 May 1941; CGS and GOC NZ Military Forces Aug 1941-Dec 1945.**

⁹ **Rev Fr J. F. Henley; Eltham; born Palmerston North, 10 Sep 1903; Roman Catholic priest.**

¹⁰ **Lt-Col J. T. Russell, DSO, m.i.d.; born Hastings, 11 Nov 1904; farmer; 2 i/c Div Cav 1941; CO 22 Bn 7 Feb-6 Sep 1942; wounded May 1941; killed in action 6 Sep 1942.**

¹¹ **Maj-Gen Sir Howard 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; CO 20 Bn Sep 1939-Apr 1941, Jun-Dec 1941; comd 10 Bde (Crete) May 1941; 5**

Bde Jan 1942-Jun 1943, Nov 1943-Feb 1944; 2 NZ Div 30 Apr-14 May 1943, 9 Feb-2 Mar 1944; 2 NZEF Prisoner of War Reception Group in UK 1944-45; twice wounded; Editor-in-Chief NZ War Histories.

¹² Maj L. H. Veale, ED; Wellington; born Christchurch, 1 Nov 1911; insurance clerk; 4 Fd Regt Oct 1939-Jun 1941; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

¹³ Maj H. C. Bliss, m.i.d.; Christchurch; born Christchurch, 22 Sep 1914; dairy farmer; bty comd 7 A-Tk Regt Dec 1941-Jul 1942; p.w. 22 Jul 1942.

¹⁴ Lt-Col J. F. R. Sprosen, DSO, ED; Christchurch; born Christchurch, 20 Jan 1908; school teacher; CO 4 Fd Regt Apr-Jun 1942, Sep-Oct 1942; 5 Fd Regt Oct-Nov 1942; 14 Lt AA Regt Nov 1942-Jun 1943, Dec 1943-Nov 1944; 7 A-Tk Regt Nov-Dec 1944; wounded 24 May 1941.

¹⁵ Capt W. G. McDonagh, m.i.d.; born Ireland, 13 Oct 1897; motor engineer; killed in action 20 May 1941.

¹⁶ Sgt G. C. Dunn; born NZ, 12 Mar 1912; clerk; died while p.w. 1 Feb 1942.

¹⁷ Sgt G. S. Brown; Dunedin; born Dunedin, 28 Apr 1912; railway employee; wounded 14 Jul 1942.

¹⁸ Cpl N. G. Fisher; Christchurch; born Southbridge, 22 Aug 1916; bowser assistant; p.w. 18 Jun 1941.

¹⁹ Cpl L. M. Chinnery; born Christchurch, 6 Nov 1912; interior decorator; p.w. 1 Jun 1941; killed in motor accident Nov 1946.

²⁰ Brig J. Hargest, CBE, DSO and bar, MC, m.i.d.; born Gore, 4 Sep 1891; farmer; MP 1931-44; Otago Mounted Rifles 1914-20

(CO 2 Bn Otago Regt); comd 5 Bde Jan 1940-Nov 1941; p.w. 27 Nov 1941; escaped Mar 1943; killed in action, **France**, 12 Aug 1944.

²¹ **Cpl C. Farley; Wellington**; born **Halcombe**, 18 Sep 1906; construction worker; p.w. 1 Jun 1941; J Force Mar 1947-Oct 1948.

²² **Lt E. J. Jackson; Christchurch**; born **Greymouth**, 4 Mar 1906; company representative; wounded 20 May 1941.

²³ **Sgt A. J. R. Johnson**; born **Rangiora**, 8 Dec 1917; truck driver; wounded 20 May 1941.

²⁴ **Cpl B. C. Ewing**; born **NZ**, 30 Mar 1914; mental hospital attendant; killed in action May 1941.

²⁵ **Cpl G. S. Campbell**; born **NZ**, 26 Jan 1905; tractor driver; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

²⁶ **Dvr C. D. Hatsell; Spreydon**; born **NZ** 28 Nov 1917; labourer; wounded 20 May 1941.

²⁷ **Dvr L. H. Washer; Lyttelton**; born **Christchurch**, 13 Oct 1915; labourer.

²⁸ **Dvr T. W. Newman; Auckland**; born **Mangere**, 18 Jun 1914; taxi-driver; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

²⁹ **Dvr J. R. Drake**; born **NZ** 21 Oct 1901; labourer; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

³⁰ **Dvr W. G. Taylor, m.i.d.; Collingwood**; born **Wakefield**, 6 May 1912; driver; p.w. May 1941; escaped 1941.

31 Lt J. P. Dill, m.i.d.; born England, 20 Aug 1915; fur merchant; died of wounds May 1941.

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

33 Sgt L. G. Clarke; Oamaru; born Oamaru, 22 Jun 1913; transport driver and mechanic; wounded 24 May 1941; p.w. 28 May 1941.

34 Sgt W. D. Jackson; born Alexandra, 19 Nov 1912; transport driver; wounded 24 May 1941.

35 Maj G. MacLean; Wanganui; born Wellington, 13 Nov 1915; farmer; twice wounded.

36 Cpl J. McD. Mitchell; born Wanganui, 8 Jan 1916; labourer; died of wounds 25 May 1941.

37 Sgt W. M. Bradshaw; Wellington; born Wellington, 25 Nov 1916; cost clerk; p.w. 25 May 1941.

38 Dvr G. Cox; born NZ, 24 Sep 1913; labourer; killed in action 25 May 1941.

39 2 Lt M. K. Gibbs, MM; Owaka; born Owaka, 20 Dec 1914; truck driver; wounded 25 May 1941.

40 L-Cpl L. G. Langdon; born Ashburton, 23 Jul 1916; lorry driver; wounded May 1941; died 21 Jul 1954.

41 Dvr J. B. Philipson; born England, 11 Nov 1899; tractor and truck driver; wounded May 1941.

42 Maj H. M. Lewis; London; born Wanganui, 27 Dec 1908; company secretary.

43 Maj-Gen L. M. Inglis, CB, CBE, DSO and bar, MC, m.i.d., MC (Greek); Palmerston North; born Mosgiel, 16 May 1894; barrister and solicitor; NZ Rifle Bde and MG Bn 1915–19; CO 27 (MG) Bn Jan-Aug 1940; comd 4 Inf Bde 1941–42 and 4 Armd Bde 1942–44; comd 2 NZ Div 27 Jun-16 Aug 1942 and 6 Jun-31 Jul 1943; Chief Judge of the Control Commission Supreme Court in British Zone of Occupation, Germany, 1947–50; Stipendiary Magistrate.

44 Cpl A. F. G. Palairret; Tolaga Bay; born Gisborne, 17 Jun 1910; bank clerk; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

45 Dvr L. A. Derrett; born NZ 10 Dec 1907; sheep farmer; killed in action 26 May 1941.

46 Cpl D. T. G. McAra; Queenstown; born Invercargill, 8 Mar 1915; grocer; p.w. 1 Jun 1941.

47 Cpl D. W. Rutherford; Timaru; born Timaru, 26 Nov 1913; grocer; p.w. 17 Jun 1941.

48 Lt-Col F. L. H. Davis, m.i.d.; Burnham MC; born Feilding, 23 Jan 1909; Regular soldier; CO 29 Bn 3 NZ Div 1943–44; wounded, Italy, 15 Apr 1945.

SUPPLY COMPANY

CHAPTER 7 – ADVANCE INTO LIBYA

CHAPTER 7

Advance into Libya

LONG trains, piping shrilly and jolting along with the unpredictable whim of the Egyptian railways, roared south from **Alexandria** in the closing days of May and early days of June 1941. Tired men lolled in their seats and watched the familiar yellow and green of the Delta flow by. The New Zealand Division, or what was left of it, was back from **Greece** and **Crete** and very ready to acknowledge—for the time being—**Egypt** as home.

For the men there were days of relaxation ahead; comfortable days on the **Mediterranean** shore and in **Cairo** bars. For the headquarters staffs there was a heartbreaking totting up of casualties and a complex sorting out of reinforcements. For the more seriously wounded there was the hospital ship *Maunganui* to take them home—right home.

The ASC normally suffers light casualties, but in **Crete** almost everyone was a front-line soldier, and now the ASC was short of 1100 men. Supply Column itself could account for little more than half of its strength, and less than half had returned to **Egypt** fit and ready to carry on. By 4 June the Column could compile a roll of nine officers and 196 other ranks who were classified as 'in **Egypt**'. In addition there were fifty-one other ranks in the 'X' lists. ¹ One officer and seven other ranks were known to be dead. But some-where on the other side of the **Mediterranean** were six officers and 210 other ranks 'not accounted for'.

Fifth Reinforcement quotas, calculated before these losses were incurred, were hopelessly inadequate for the ASC, and after absorbing 580 of its own reinforcements the corps was still looking around for more. Volunteers were called for from other arms, and as a last resort men were compulsorily transferred. Even then there was a shortage of skilled trades- men. The 6th Reinforcements, which reached **Tewfik** on 29 July, brought a meagre 249 men for the ASC in a total strength of 3808.

With the exception of **6 Brigade**, which went to the Canal to set up a defence scheme at **Moascar** and **Ismailia**, the Division camped at **Helwan** while it built up its strength and gathered in new equipment. Still without trucks, the ASC, Supply Column included, had to put in the earlier days unhappily tramping the desert and filling in time with drill. To overcome the transport problem, trucks were pooled and 2 Armoured Division Troops Company RASC lent a hand with trucks and drivers.

Ships were already on their way up from the Cape, however, with brand-new American vehicles, and as these arrived the ASC regained its mobility. In Supply Column both new and old hands had much to learn. These new four-wheel-drive three-tonners had to be mastered, and before the Column could be ready to play its part again there was plenty to be done. As the weeks went by the men learned not only to drive in good and bad going, but to unditch, make good mechanical faults, carry out repairs, and generally keep their trucks on the move.

Though the men were not to know it, there was a desert campaign ahead, and all this training was to have an important bearing in giving the 'service' part of the ASC some significance. For 'soft-skinned' transport mobility is the only defence, and in the highly mobile campaign ahead of them ability to keep their vehicles moving, and when they broke down to get them rolling again as quickly as possible, was sometimes to mean the difference between a successful operation and the loss to the enemy of supplies, men, and, more important, trucks. If there is a suggestion of callousness in placing trucks before men, war has a habit of switching values. In the jargon of a 'Confucius Say' sign that appeared later in **Tunisia**, 'Easy get new driver, difficult get new truck'.

So there were manoeuvres, exercises and general training programmes. The working part of Supply Column's activities was mainly the old general carrier role. Being close to a DID and base transport services, the Division did not use to full capacity its ASC vehicles, and Supply Column was called on to do a variety of jobs. A supply point was

operated for **5 Brigade**, which was digging defences at **Alamein**.

While the New Zealanders were fighting, resting and training, the world about them had been changing. On 22 June the Germans on the Continent turned east in a gigantic attack on **Russia**. In the **Middle East** the British and Australians had made **Syria** secure, but in **Libya** the arrival of General Rommel with German troops had completely changed the scene, and General Wavell's brilliant gains were swallowed up as the enemy surged forward again to the Egyptian frontier. **Tobruk**, the relief of which was to be one of the chief objectives of the New Zealanders' next action, was held against heavy German attacks and remained as an embarrassing thorn in the side of the enemy forces.

While over the weeks the various units developed their training, Supply Column took its trucks along the roads and out into the desert on full-scale exercises designed to give the men some idea of what went on when the unit became mobile. The results are reflected in a comment in a convoy report late in September: 'Standard of driving by our drivers was uniformly high.... Driving in desert formation was of high standard.'

In September New Zealand Division went back to the desert. The brigades settled into a troglodyte existence in the **Baggush** Box, and with the rest of the ASC the Supply Column established itself at **Fuka**.

The journey back to the desert was full of interest, particularly for the old hands who had come this way so often in 1940. Where there had been open desert there were now army camps and airfields on which trim fighters and broad-winged bombers were to be seen. To men accustomed to a hostile sky, the air seemed almost crowded with friendly planes.

Of passing interest is the fact that the Column took from dawn to dusk to travel from **Helwan** to **Amiriya**. Nine months later, when the Division came down from **Syria** in very much of a hurry, the Column travelled from **Suez** to **Amiriya**, double the distance, in the same time.

A freedom-loving soldier, the New Zealander was always glad to get away from base where, it seemed to him, senior officers, for lack of

something better to do, were apt to pester him with too much 'soldierliness'. It is a natural line of logic that the greater the opportunity to break away from this, the greater will be the transgressions, and Supply Column found a mobile life eminently suited to exploitation along these lines. Free of the restraints of an official frown, the men would strip off their shirts, boots and socks and enjoy the comfort of old clothing or practically none. Once away from Helwan on this particular journey back to the desert, they were not slow to dispense with their clothing. Major Pryde, who had left the camp at Helwan last to ensure that everything was left as it should be, found when he overtook the convoy that his men had already stripped for comfort. At Amiriya that night he told them just what he thought of the 'circus procession' they had staged through Cairo, and with some force complained that the men were even wearing 'bloody football jerseys'. By a curious chance, the 'bloody football jerseys' caught on and echoed through the unit for years and is still heard at unit reunions.

But the men were not as free as they expected to be. Though Fuka was in the desert, there was still too much of the restrictive air of a base camp for the men to be altogether happy. An understandable nervousness over enemy aircraft—memories of Greece and Crete were still fresh—was reflected in various orders, and to make things worse, after there had been several drownings, even swimming became implicated in sternly worded 'thou shalt nots'. The result was a curious eagerness to carry sea water needed by the cooks to lay the dust around the cookhouse.

There was justification for precautions against the trouble from the air, however. Fuka station and airfield were not far away and enemy aircraft gave their attention to both. Incendiaries intended for the aerodrome on one occasion fell in the Column area. Fuka station went up in spectacular pyrotechnics when an ammunition train was hit, and the railhead was temporarily shifted back to Daba.

Supply Column was engaged in many jobs, but its primary task was

to build up No. 2 Forward Base at **Bir el Thalata**, a dump of ammunition, petrol and supplies that formed part of over 33,000 tons stocked up in the forward areas for the coming attack. Loaded trucks went forward from **Fuka** in the afternoon and laagered a few miles from the dump, which was in view of the enemy, until dark. Then they moved forward again and unloaded. As the trucks turned away home, an Indian labour corps pulled across the camouflage and smeared away the wheel tracks.

In this work Supply Column saw something of the shocking waste of petrol that was the result of the use of the four-gallon petrol can, commonly known as the 'flimsy'. And flimsy it was. As an expendable item, it served a good purpose in less rigorous civilian life, but in the Army its expendability began the moment it was moved, and all sorts of calculations have been made about the percentage of petrol that survived the long jolting journey into the desert by the **Egyptian State Railways** and ASC trucks. The flimsy even inspired a cartoon by Brian Robb, who in his series 'Little Known Units of the **Western Desert**', drew a three-tonner packed with flimsies and leaking a small **Niagara** of petrol through the tailboard. Its title: 'Vehicle of the Petrol Dispersal Column'.

There was also the customary job of supplying the Division to be done; in fact, the point at **Sidi Haneish** fed not only the Division but British and South African troops and the **RAF** as well. Supply details opened shop here on 17 September in a depot about the size of a tennis court and ankle deep in dust. While British fighters and bombers roared low overhead they unloaded their equipment and got down to business. Supplies were drawn from 18 DID at the railhead twelve miles away. Dust and heat, and winds carrying both, made conditions unpleasant, particularly when it came to handling fresh meat and vegetables. Dull routine was occasionally broken by air raids on the nearby railway station, and on one occasion—on 14 October—the OC supply details, Captain Quirk, received an unwelcome souvenir, an unexploded bomb placed on his table. He called in the engineers to remove it.

The following day a Supply Column man had an even more hair-raising experience when, while testing Captain Roberts's ² car, he

collided with a Hurricane making a forced landing. The Hurricane sheared away the radiator and hood, and made a good landing on one wheel. The driver and a passenger in the car were unhurt.

By November the Division was ready and there were signs that something was in the wind. Supply Column received more three-tonners to bring its transport up to establishment, and a number of anti-aircraft trucks—mounting ineffectual Bren guns—were assigned to it. Trucks were loaded up. Although the intention may have been reasonably obvious, the Division's movements were concealed behind a pretence of manœuvres. On 10 November a Supply Column operation order said: 'The NZ Div Sup Coln is carrying out supply of NZ Div during exercises No. 4.'

Pryde called a conference of officers on this day. Afterwards, he called Roberts aside and told him that during the 'exercise' the Division might undertake manœuvres as brigade groups. If this happened brigade composite companies would be formed, and the first would include a part of each of Supply, Petrol and Ammunition Companies under Roberts's command.

The happy thought of taking his echelon, No. 2, away from the Column in a detached role brought a smile to Roberts's face, and **Pryde** looked stern.

'And listen, laddie,' he added, 'I'm not fooling.'

Roberts soon found that he wasn't.

Out from the hillocks and wadis of the **Baggush** Box streamed an unending line of vehicles. One by one they jolted on to the coastal highway, a black strip of bitumen across the dusty yellow desert, and turned west. First came the trucks of Headquarters **5 Brigade**, and after them the hump-backed quads and guns of **5 Field Regiment**, then the anti-tank portées and the long-barrelled Bofors. After these came trucks, miles of trucks, crowded with sappers and infantrymen of four battalions

—21, 22, 23 and 28. A company of machine-gunners followed, and then an assortment of ASC units, **5 Field Ambulance**, and at the tail, Supply Column (less four sections), which had driven up from **Fuka** during the morning.

The date was 11 November 1941, and the first part of the New Zealand Division was moving out for its first full-scale offensive action in a campaign with the code-name **CRUSADER**. At the **Baggush** turn-off New Zealand's High Commissioner in the **United Kingdom**, Mr. W. J. Jordan, a short, stocky figure in a grey suit, stood by the road and waved his black Homburg to the passing column.

Also on the ground to watch the spectacle was **Major Pryde**, who stood with Brigadier Hargest at a check point near **Mersa Matruh**. **Pryde** had reached this day with a feeling of complete confidence in the ability of the Column to carry out its task. Unlike the Supply Column that had gone to **Greece**, which had been thrown together barely hours before sailing, the unit now had been training as a team for months and was ready for the future. With justifiable pride **Major Pryde** watched his vehicles go by with almost perfect spacing, and with satisfaction listened to Brigadier Hargest's compliment.

To the bystander a passing convoy is an impressive spectacle: the slow-moving, winding line of vehicles and guns seems to glide forward with the inexorable power and weight of a battleship. But for the men, seeing little else beyond the road sliding away from the tailboard and under the nose of the next truck in line, there is little romance to relieve the tedious, crowded, uncomfortable hours on a whining three-tonner. In any case, the Army inures the most romantic soul to anything calculated to stir the emotions.

‘It was,’ a Supply Column man recalls, ‘like lining up for another job. I remember it took a long time to get started as there was so much traffic on the road.’

Column Headquarters, A, C, E, G and J Sections followed **5 Brigade**

group out on this day. At Matruh A and E Sections broke away and made off to Smugglers' Cove, where they would be in a handy position to draw from No. 1 Forward Base on the morning of 12 November.

The rest of the convoy turned down the Siwa Road and halted at Sidi Husein, 17 miles south-west of **Matruh**. During the move the Column broke bulk and issued 6700 rations. The headquarters of No. 1 Echelon and B and F Sections left **Fuka** next day, joined 4 Infantry Brigade group at **Baggush**, and drove forward with that formation to the divisional assembly area. Finally, the headquarters of No. 2 Echelon and D and H Sections joined 6 Infantry Brigade group on 13 November at **Baggush** and the whole group moved up the same day, thereby completing the Division's assembly in the new area.

CRUSADER was different from any previous campaign. True, the British had been this way before, but this time the principal enemy, in strength if not in numbers, was the German armoured group. And this was Eighth Army's first battle, and its aim was a resounding victory.

Across the Libyan border were 100,000 enemy troops—one third German and two thirds Italian—equipped with 357 tanks, of which 227 were German. Eighth Army was 118,000 strong and had more than 800 tanks, of which 500 were cruisers and 273 infantry tanks. General Cunningham's first aim was to destroy the German tank forces. The main attack was to be made by **30 Corps**, under Lieutenant-General Willoughby Norrie. Thirteenth Corps, commanded by Lieutenant-General Godwin-Austen, was in the first place to contain the enemy troops holding the frontier positions. New Zealand Division was part of **13 Corps**.

German and Italian positional troops manned the frontier posts and contained **Tobruk**. Two German and two Italian divisions were preparing to attack **Tobruk** and a German and an Italian armoured division, together with an Italian motorised division, formed a mobile force to meet any British threat.

In the desert south of **Matruh** the New Zealand Division prepared for its part. During 12 and 13 November the Division grew to full strength, and Supply Column began to learn what it was like catering for a full division in the field. On the 13th it broke bulk for the whole Division twice—35,000 rations—and next day issued hard rations. On the 15th the whole Division moved forward in daylight to **Bir el Thalata**, 55 miles to the west. There were vehicles as far as the eye could see, almost 3000 of them on a six-mile front, each with its trailing cloud of dust, rolling across broken, stony ground.

That night and all next day the Division remained stationary, but forty Supply Column vehicles went back to 29 FSD to draw four days' rations—74,000. There was a hitch at the depot; delivery was refused, and No. 2 Forward Base confirmed that issues would not be made here as the dump was being held until the battle commenced. After a tussle with colonels and majors, Quirk secured permission to draw, and at last, at 2.15 p.m., loading began. The dump was 15 miles square, and consequently the task was a long one, and as vehicles were feverishly loaded an anxious eye was kept on the time. It was 8.15 p.m. before the convoy pulled out, and the Division was already on its way west again. Despite a clear, starry sky, it was pitch black, and without the aid of a compass the convoy moved north until it found the green lights marking the divisional axis. During the march a solitary bomb burst about half a mile away, though no plane could be seen. The Division was overtaken in the early hours of the morning.

On 16–17 November was the first night move of the Division towards the frontier. By day vehicles were checked and repaired, and Supply Column went about its duties. At night the only lights were the track markers; the going was rough, the sand sometimes soft, and inevitably there was some confusion—'Wrong guff, wrong areas, muck ups from HQ.' It was tense and tiring, and it was shown quite clearly that the vital thing was to keep drivers awake so that not only they but the following vehicles should not be lost. There was a strong temptation to find solace in the forbidden cigarette. When Sergeant-Major **Beer**,³ a

former Imperial Army man, found a Supply Column man smoking he bawled him out in a proper manner. A few minutes later the Sergeant-Major was back.

‘You still got that cigarette going?’

‘Er, yes.’

‘Give me a light, will you.’

The night marches showed, too, that Workshops could depend on plenty of work after movement in darkness. Springs were broken, radiators stove in as drivers, unable to see what was happening ahead, charged halting vehicles, and differentials were dragged out of position when vehicles crashed through slit trenches. On movements such as this workshops men travelled all night then worked all day repairing the night's damage.

The breakdown truck itself—‘Flannagan II’, a Chevrolet, driven by Driver Hyland, with Sergeant **Goulden**⁴ in charge—was detached on the first night. On 19 November it overtook two three-tonners that had collided and become immobilised. One truck was got working and the other was towed, the vehicles joining up with the Column on the 21st.

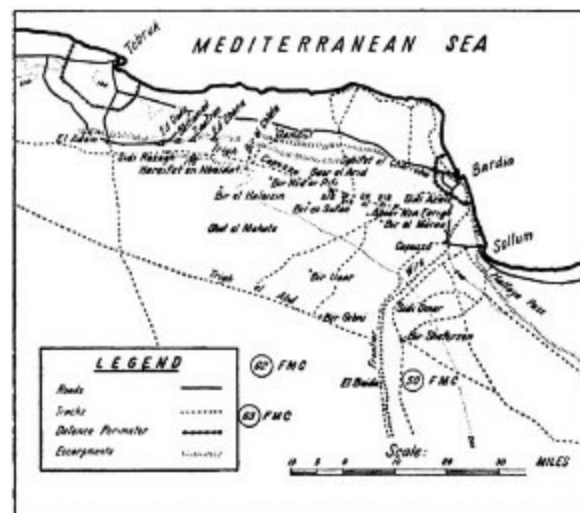
As the Division moved forward on the night of 17–18 November, lightning was flickering in the north-west, and next day gunfire could be heard. At dawn **30 Corps** crossed the border and advanced into **Libya**, meeting no resistance. The enemy was blissfully ignorant that a major attack was pending. The following night the New Zealand Division crossed the border also. Sappers tore out a 300-yard gap in the frontier wire and the vehicles streamed through.

During the 18th the Supply Column issues had given units rations for the 19th and 20th, plus three days' reserves—a contrast with the seven days' reserves that units were to carry a year later. The Column moved forward about 7 p.m. in the cold and starry darkness, with gunfire and bombing rumbling and flashing to the north. On arrival at

the new area at **El Beida** the Column found itself in difficulties; some units in the line of march were out of position, and the Column had to settle down in a temporary area. On the afternoon of the 19th the unit moved to its correct area as Messerschmitts came down on a nearby **RAF** airfield.

About five came skimming towards Supply Column 'with a nasty screaming sound', and as they began to spray the desert the vehicles scattered. The planes did no damage and left to chase a Tomahawk.

Pushing west on 19 November **30 Corps** began to beat up trouble. The New Zealanders on the 21st began their encirclement of the frontier positions. While Supply Column remained anchored with the administration group at **El Beida**, the fighting units pushed north and then fanned out, **5 Brigade** to **Fort Capuzzo** and **Sollum Barracks**, **4 Brigade** to the escarpment west of **Bardia**, and **6 Brigade** westwards along the **Trigh Capuzzo** to come under command of **30 Corps**.



Field Maintenance Centres in November 1941 campaign

Field Maintenance Centres in November 1941 campaign

Capuzzo fell to **5 Brigade** on the 22nd, and **4 Indian Division** captured part of the **Omar** forts, but a substantial pocket held out in **Libyan Omar**. Wherever the enemy was still holding out in the frontier area, he was cut off from his main forces in the west.

Back at [El Beida](#) there was at first little excitement but plenty of hard work. 'Two uneventful days supplying our troops,' is how Quirk summarised it. This entailed sending convoys back to 50 FSD ⁵ and sending rations forward to a prearranged supply point. For this short period, at least, the Column was able to work to the book. It was one of the few occasions throughout the war that it did. 'The book' was still the system of echelons, in which certain vehicles were earmarked to carry rations for specified units. This was found to be clumsy and uneconomical for transport, and it meant that B echelon transport from the units had to find particular trucks at the supply point.

The rations in this campaign were not good. No ration scale had been discovered for this period, and the nearest battle ration scale, that for some time in 1942, may be slightly more generous. This provides for two ounces of bacon, nine ounces of biscuits, three-quarters of an ounce of cheese, three ounces of jam or marmalade, one ounce of margarine, two ounces of milk, nine ounces of M and V, three-sevenths of an ounce of salmon or herrings, four ounces of sugar, half an ounce of tea and half an ounce of salt each day, and finally 50 cigarettes a week. In the early part of [CRUSADER](#) corned beef was served more often than M and V, there was little bacon, and the salmon was labelled fifth-grade and, even so, rarely reached the fighting units of the New Zealand Division. The main meal of the day was generally bully and biscuits, although extras carried by the cooks' trucks and careful cooking helped make the food more palatable. When a comparison is made with later British ration scales and the current German rations, however, the Army at this stage was poorly catered for.

Orders to move north came to the Column at 1 p.m. on 21 November, while No. 2 Echelon was away at the supply point and No. 1 Echelon on its way back to 50 FSD. Column Headquarters and J Section went on alone and were overtaken by the echelons early in the evening at the new position south of the Trigh el Abd, previously occupied by Divisional Headquarters. Next morning a similar move, this time of 22 miles northwards, was executed to [Abiar Nza Ferigh](#); Column

Headquarters, J Section and the attached water section moved on, and Nos. 1 and 2 Echelons finished their tasks and followed up.

The 22-mile trip to **Abiar Nza Ferigh** taught another lesson. Before setting out a course was set by sun compass, but after the Headquarters convoy had been travelling for an hour or so the sky became overcast—nearer the coast it was raining—and a switch had to be made to navigation by magnetic compass. The change created an error that gave the unit a slight swing to the east, and shells that came droning in on to the right flank showed that it was too near the Omars for comfort.

The convoy sheered away to the north-west for three miles. This threw it across the front of another convoy moving up on its left, and the Column switched to the north again. In heavy rain the vehicles moved on. When the estimated mileage was up, it was found that because of the changes in direction the unit was seven miles too close to **Capuzzo**—no place to be near on the 22nd—and it moved to its correct area.



Above the harbour of
Kea Island

Above the harbour of **Kea Island**

The march across Kea
Island



The march across Kea Island



Ay Marina, Crete
Ay Marina, Crete



The village of Platania (high on left) from Ay Marina. Maleme is in the right distance. The painting, by J. L. McIndoe, was carried with him when he was taken prisoner.

The village of Platania (high on left) from Ay Marina. Maleme is in the right distance. The painting, by J. L. McIndoe, was carried with him when he was taken prisoner.



The airborne invasion

The airborne invasion



A transport section with new trucks prepared to move from Helwan

A transport section with new trucks prepared to move from Helwan



Headquarters area near Fuka

Headquarters area near Fuka

That night tracer could be seen cutting through the darkness, and the men went to sleep with the rumble of artillery in their ears.

While the New Zealanders had met with reasonable success at the frontier, further west in the **Tobruk area the plan was coming unstuck. The British armour that had set out to smash the German panzers had come off second best, mainly because of superior German tactics, and 7 Support Group was now hard pressed.**

Sixth Brigade was promptly ordered by **30 Corps to go to the aid of the support group on the **Sidi Rezegh** escarpment. The order came to**

Brigade Headquarters on the afternoon of the 22nd; the brigade travelled all that night and in the morning had a short, sharp and very satisfactory skirmish with an enemy group that was found to be part of *Afrika Korps Headquarters*. Valuable documents were captured.

The brigade then moved on and 25 Battalion went straight into an attack on Point 175. There was bitter fighting, but with the aid of 24 Battalion about half of the feature was captured and held. Meanwhile 26 Battalion had swung to the south-west to link up with 5 South African Infantry Brigade. This brigade, however, was overrun during the afternoon, and 26 Battalion, after fighting off enemy attacks, rejoined the rest of 6 Brigade that night. The latter brigade settled down under cover of darkness and prepared to meet tanks next day.

Unaware of 6 Brigade's situation, the Division made plans to send it supplies. On the afternoon of 22 November a 6 Brigade Company was formed consisting of C Section of Ammunition Company (Second-Lieutenant Butt ⁶), D and H Sections of Supply Column (Second-Lieutenants Daniel ⁷ and Lyon, ⁸ with Second-Lieutenant Demouth ⁹ as Supply Officer), B Section of Petrol Company (Second-Lieutenant Swarbrick ¹⁰) and six vehicles from B Section 4 RMT to carry water. Headquarters of No. 2 Echelon Supply Column also went along, and the commander was Captain Roberts.

The 22nd November was the last day of comparative peace for Supply Column. Further west a hot little cauldron was bubbling to boiling point and was soon to boil over; whoever was abroad on the desert would have to move quickly or be scalded. On 23 November, when 6 Brigade Company began its operations, the pot was already simmering.

At 7 a.m. B Section (Petrol Company) and D Section (Supply Column) were sent off to 62 FMC to load. They were to join 6 Brigade Company at Bir el Chleta, where 6 Brigade Headquarters was thought to be. Two hours later the company itself set off from Abiar Nza Ferigh for Bir el Chleta. At 10.15 a.m. it met two officers also on their way to 6 Brigade Headquarters—Captain Hooper, ¹¹ 6 Brigade liaison officer, and

Captain Squires, who was leading B echelon transport of C Squadron 8 Royal Tanks, attached to 6 Brigade. Hooper warned that enemy tanks were on the Trigh Capuzzo at Gasr el Arid.

Roberts set a course to the west, proposing to turn north at a point west of the reported tank concentration. The convoy had not gone far, however, before enemy armoured fighting vehicles ahead prompted a quick turn around. The AFVs disappeared, and the convoy resumed its journey westwards.

It soon appeared that the desert in these parts was fairly crawling with the enemy. As the trucks swung north about 2 p.m., unidentified AFVs were seen about a mile to the west. They were travelling away to the west and were accompanied by several trucks. And while the New Zealanders were watching and wondering, their trucks ran among the slit trenches and weapon pits of a recently vacated Italian camp. Italian wine bottles and Italian food tins were littered about, and the dying embers of a fire were still smouldering.

The convoy ran north across the almost table-flat desert. Soon after 3.30 p.m., when the Trigh Capuzzo was only five miles away, three armoured cars came in from the east, and to avoid being headed off, Roberts speeded up his convoy. But he had barely escaped from this danger when he encountered a fresh hazard.

Approaching Bir Nza er-Rifi, where the ground falls away to the Trigh Capuzzo, he saw a large concentration of transport spread across the slope on the far side of a wadi. Roberts halted his trucks half a mile to the south and Lyon went forward to see whether the transport was friend or foe. He was not left long in doubt. About fifteen minutes later machine guns began to crackle and long arcs of tracer came darting towards the New Zealand convoy. The fire was coming from three armoured cars, two light machine guns in prepared positions, and several small-calibre guns, probably anti-tank weapons.

As the convoy turned south and fled, large concentrations of trucks

were seen to the east moving in a north-westerly direction. After covering eight miles the convoy changed direction east and set a course for Bir es Sufan, where it laagered for the night. During the night tanks and motor vehicles, not identified, passed close, travelling south-east and, unknown to Roberts, NZ Divisional Headquarters Group, with 20 and 21 Battalions and a squadron of I tanks, passed close by on its way to **Bir el Chleta**. In the morning the broad tracks of German tanks, as it was thought, were found on the ground.

At daybreak another column was observed approaching from the north-west, the general direction in which the hostile vehicles encountered the previous day had lain. As the convoy was about to set off for home— **Abiar Nza Ferigh**—a solitary vehicle approached from the west. In it were one officer and two near-dead soldiers of 5 South African Brigade. They were taken to Supply Column Headquarters, reached at 10 a.m. without loss of men or vehicles, and sent on to Divisional Headquarters.

The 6th Brigade Company was disbanded without having accomplished its mission. Daniel and Demouth, meanwhile, had run into trouble of their own. After loading up 4000 rations at 62 FMC, the convoy, headed by Daniel's truck, set off for **Bir el Chleta** at 12.30 p.m. After an overnight halt the journey was resumed at first light, and about the time that Roberts was making for home, Daniel's trucks were rolling west along **Trigh Capuzzo**. The convoy was not running in blind ignorance, however, for that morning a warning had been received that there were enemy columns about, and Daniel went 600 to 700 yards ahead to act as scout.

All went well until 9 a.m., when the convoy was about three miles east of **Gasr el Arid**, where tanks had been reported the previous day by Captain Hooper. At this point the road dipped abruptly into a shallow wadi, and for a minute or two Daniel's truck disappeared from the sight of the following convoy. When it was seen again the truck was off the road and was heading north-west straight towards a large group of tanks and trucks. Machine guns spluttered to life and bullets came zipping

around the laden trucks.

As the New Zealanders put about they saw Daniel's truck apparently still heading into what appeared to be a hail of explosive bullets and anti-tank shells. What happened to him no one wanted to see. At that moment there were other things to think of.

Unexpectedly the Column adjutant, Second-Lieutenant **Watt**,¹² appeared on the scene. His mission was to turn back both Roberts and Daniel. Learning that the **6 Brigade** Company scheme had been cancelled and that these convoys had been sent into what was now believed to be enemy-held territory, Watt left Column Headquarters at 5.30 p.m. on 23 November and headed his Dodge 'bug' towards the setting sun. When darkness fell he halted and bunked down. Watt slept in the truck, his driver, **Myers**,¹³ underneath.

At dawn Watt woke with a feeling that everything was not quite right. 'Crawling over the tailboard I gently woke Myers. Do you see what I see? A mashie shot away were some tanks, about eight of them. We climbed into the bug and prayed that the motor would start immediately. Thanks to our ever faithful Workshops Section, off she went after a couple of kicks.'

Away they went at top speed to the north-east. When they stopped for breakfast they were thoroughly lost. For a while they cruised around, and at last saw through the haze a convoy that looked familiar—Daniel's.

Several miles back down **Trigh Capuzzo** the now retreating convoy encountered a British headquarters. When Watt reported to 'a thoroughly English colonel' that there were tanks a few miles up the track he was laughed at. 'Treated me as a case of wind up, I think. However, I insisted that I send a message to our own headquarters. He reluctantly introduced me to his adjutant, who was much more sympathetic. In fact, he almost believed me. Driver and I jogged along not knowing what to do about the other convoy until some time later (it

was 25 November) we ran into our own Supply Column moving up with the rest of the Division.'

And Daniel? He now was a prisoner of war. Demouth reported that Daniel's truck had inexplicably driven on into a hail of bullets, but this was an illusion in the midst of a 'flap'. As his truck had nosed down into the wadi, Daniel, seeing a concentration of tanks and armoured vehicles about half a mile to the right, decided he would drive over and verify his position as direction had been lost the previous night. His driver, **Keppel**,¹⁴ remarked that the vehicles did not look British, but Daniel, believing there were no enemy columns as far east as this, insisted on going over.

When about 200 or 300 yards from the group, Keppel again said he did not think the vehicles were British, and while he eased up, Daniel poked his head through the roof and put up his binoculars. Instantly tracer came darting towards them. Keppel swung hard on the wheel, but the motor, apparently hit, cut out, and the truck coasted to a stop. Bullets slashed through the radiator and hammered out holes in the cab and even in the water tank in the back. Flying glass cut Daniel's hand, but otherwise the two men were unharmed.

An armoured car came over and took them prisoner.

Keppel, later released from **Bardia**, came through his adventure with one bright story. After the usual interrogation—what unit (no answer), where were they going (they were lost), why did they volunteer to leave a good country like New Zealand to fight in a country like this, and why did **Churchill** do this and that—the questioning officer, who did not press for an answer if one was refused, saw a medal Keppel had been awarded for winning the mile championship in the 1941 divisional athletic championships.

'I see you are a good runner, but you didn't run fast enough this morning,' said the officer.

Keppel agreed. The officer, who said he had got to know the New Zealand champion runner Jack Lovelock during the 1936 Olympic

Games at **Berlin**, asked Keppel whether he knew him. Keppel replied that he did, and that he had in fact competed against him.

‘What a pity you could not run as fast as him,’ replied the German. ‘You would have been half-way to **Cairo** by now.’

Shot up, shelled and bombed as it went, this enemy group made its way to the Egyptian frontier and made the attack on **Sidi Azeiz**. Keppel, sent into **Bardia**, was searched by Italians and lost his medal, but he complained to a German guard, who retrieved it for him.

While all this was going on, Supply Column, back at **Abiar Nza Ferigh**, was carrying out, or attempting to carry out, normal supply duties, as well as trying to handle a small horde of prisoners that fighting units were sending for transport to the prisoner-of-war cages further back. With many men away on other tasks, the Column had a worrying time providing guards for the Germans—the Italians were no bother—and the situation was not improved when infantry escorts, contrary to orders, refused to remain with prisoners until the Column was able to release them. But this reluctance of infantrymen to remain, whatever difficulties it caused, hardly called for a reprimand; their keenness to return to their units typified the high morale of the Division in this campaign.

On 23 November No. 1 Echelon was sent back to 50 FSD, taking with it 150 German and Italian prisoners. No. 2 Echelon broke bulk and at 2 p.m. was ordered forward to a supply point at Point 212 on **Trigh Capuzzo**.

Fourth Brigade was now on its way westward. On the morning of 23 November, with C Squadron of the Divisional Cavalry and **44 Royal Tanks** (less one squadron), the brigade moved cautiously towards **Gambut**. Shelling halted it for a while in the morning, but by mid-afternoon it had secured the **Gambut** airfield.

After **4 Brigade** came Captain Quirk with thirty No. 2 Echelon

vehicles to set up his supply point at Point 212. But somewhere things went wrong. Along the **Trigh Capuzzo** there is first a Point 212, seven miles west a Point 213, which is at the map reference given in the war diary as the Point 212 where the supply point was fixed, and six miles further west again a second Point 212. In general, no one at the time seems to have been clear which was which. The outgoing supply convoy was given a wrong map reference and away it went. It overtook **4 Brigade** on the move, and when the brigade stopped 'moved up through artillery and odd parts of the division'. Watched no doubt by wondering infantrymen, it disappeared in the direction of the enemy to the supposed supply point. 'We thought the place was not quite right,' writes Quirk.

'An officer came up very fast and told us that the blotches on the horizon were German tanks, that our general was preparing to engage them and that we were in the direct line of fire, would we please move our transport,' he recalls. 'We moved smartly to the rear of the division and sat there to see the outcome. However, darkness was coming on very fast and there was no engagement.'

That night a supply point was set up, but in the dark several units failed to arrive, and an instruction was given by the Assistant Adjutant and Quartermaster-General (Lieutenant-Colonel **Maxwell**¹⁵) that supplies were to be taken forward to them.

During the night a message was received that the trucks were in a dangerous area and that preparations were to be made in case of attack. Later tanks came clattering through the darkness, but they were friendly and parked nearby. They were a rear group of **13 Corps**, lost and seeking its location. Quirk was able to assist.

The next day Quirk returned to the unit while Watt and Second-Lieutenant **Latimer**¹⁶ went on in search of the units that had not received rations. This was easier said than done. The convoy ran into a tank battle and was unable to move until dark, when it finally located the remainder of **4 Brigade B** echelon.

On Monday, 24 November, the pot was boiling hard. On this day Rommel launched his counter-thrust to the Egyptian frontier. The New Zealand Division, meanwhile, was pressing forward to secure the vital ground outside **Tobruk—Belhamed** and the escarpment at **Sidi Rezegh**. For Supply Column there was now trouble wherever a convoy turned.

Point 175 was securely held by 24 and 25 Battalions. Fourth Brigade cleared **Gambut** and came up abreast of them. Early on 25 November 4 and 6 Brigades pushed on, **4 Brigade** to take **Zaafran**, and 24 and 26 Battalions along the escarpment to seize the so-called Blockhouse and the **Sidi Rezegh** airfield. Ahead still lay **Belhamed** and the escarpment by the mosque of **Sidi Rezegh**.

Rommel's counter-stroke, meanwhile, was scattering Eighth Army supply transport in all directions. To save his invested frontier positions he despatched **15 and 21 Panzer Divisions** and the **Ariete Division**, and as they struck eastward they inevitably created alarm and confusion in all directions.

To Supply Column, now busily weaving a web of supplies across the desert, all this was most disconcerting. In the course of 24 November the Column had no fewer than seven convoys in various parts of **Libya**: Quirk was bringing in the No. 2 Echelon group from supplying **4 Brigade**, and part of this, under Watt and Latimer, was still chasing up the rest of the brigade; Roberts was returning with his unsuccessful **6 Brigade** Company, and Demouth was bringing in his part of it; No. 1 Echelon returned from a routine visit to 50 FSD, and later in the day went out to victual the Division; and Second-Lieutenant **Battersby**¹⁷ set out for 50 FSD, only to find his way blocked by tanks.

After the mishaps of 23 November no convoy was sent to the supply point on the 24th until the Commander NZASC reported that the area chosen was clear of the enemy. Then, escorted by two Bren carriers and a Honey tank, Morris set out at 3 p.m. with No. 1 Echelon.

The trucks did not get far. Seven miles out they ran into a soft pan,

and half a dozen of them sank to their axles and gear boxes. The Honey could make no headway with the floundering vehicles. More Bren carriers came into view some time later, and after the trucks had been unloaded, the carriers, three to each vehicle, dragged them clear. After that it was time to brew up.

It was now too late to continue, and the convoy laagered in square formation and Morris sent back to the unit for hot rations. The night was pitch black—fortunately. In the early hours of the morning the roar and clatter of trucks and tanks came across the desert from the north and steadily swelled into a tremendous clamour; armour moving at night sounds like a horde of racing cars belting along with long strings of old iron trailing behind. The armoured column, identified as German, rolled past the laagered trucks; only 500 yards away, the column was between Morris's convoy and Supply Column Headquarters. 'If Jerry had chosen a course 500 yards west of the one he took he would have driven clean through us in the dark,' reports Morris. By daylight the enemy had gone.

On the way to the supply point that morning the convoy was stopped by an armoured patrol and told to wait for instructions. Two miles due south British tanks attached to **13 Corps** were engaging the enemy, and 'anything was likely to happen'. After about half an hour's waiting around Morris was allowed to speak to **Rear Divisional Headquarters** on the radio of one of the AFVs and was given a new point at which to rejoin Column Headquarters.

Then down from the hazy sky came screaming Stukas, about eighteen of them, and bombs began erupting. 'Still no casualties, but we were glad when things quietened down for a bit.' At the supply rendezvous the Supply Column men found the Division engaged in an artillery duel. Vehicles were dispersed, supplies distributed to units who came for them, and a small quantity of 25-pounder ammunition was delivered to the guns. More enemy planes came down, but though there were casualties around about, the Supply Column came through 'without more than a fright'.

But the job was still not completed. Hot spot though this might be, there were still troops somewhere to whom rations must be taken, and part of the convoy under Rawle went forward. The trucks went over the escarpment where **6 Brigade** had only recently fought, and on to the road. Shellfire was splashing about, but no one was hit. The convoy went west along the road, through the artillery, and dispersed and halted while Rawle made a reconnaissance. Bombers swooped on the trucks and nearby 25-pounders and anti-tank guns, and while the Supply Column men flattened themselves against the ground, jagged holes appeared in their vehicles. Again no one was hit. The artillery kept hammering away.

When Rawle returned the trucks moved forward again and no time was wasted in unloading at the various cooks' trucks. Then they pulled back behind the artillery and camped for the night. Artillery officers asked if they had any ammunition as they were running short. That night the guns were busy, and counter-battery fire from the enemy kept things lively. When the convoy pulled back in the morning, the drivers could hear behind them the chatter of machine guns and the crack of mortars and artillery.

The other section of the convoy had also spent the night abroad in the desert. It camped between **General Freyberg's** headquarters and the enemy at **Gambut**, and a runner came out with the suggestion that it would be safer behind the tank screen. Morris preferred to stay where he was, however, and was granted permission 'at his own peril'. Both sections rejoined the unit that day.

Back at **Abiar Nza Ferigh** all this time the rest of the Column was having trouble of its own. At 4 p.m. on 24 November the water section, under Battersby, set off for 50 FSD to replenish. The trucks carried wounded. At 8 p.m. Battersby was back with the information that he had met enemy AFVs 15 miles to the south, and as he was carrying wounded he could not risk an attempt to run around them. This was alarming news, for 50 FSD was the source of supplies, and that morning a No. 2 Echelon convoy under Second-Lieutenant **Cottrell** ¹⁸ had set out for this

depot to load up.

At 10 a.m. next day **13 Corps** reported that the route to 50 FSD was open, and away went Battersby again. He returned at 1 p.m. with the news that the enemy was still astride the route and in fact had moved eight miles to the north. Nothing had been heard from Cottrell and all that was known of him was that he had been seen by a tank officer passing through the wire into **Egypt** at 5 p.m. the previous day. His non-return was presumed—rightly—to be due to the presence of enemy armour.

Here the lack of something was shown. ASC units were not equipped with radio and once abroad in the desert had no way of calling up their headquarters. ASC convoys, criss-crossing the desert on their various tasks, could have been useful as reconnaissance patrols, but whatever they saw on their travels and whatever trouble they encountered, they could do absolutely nothing except run. Had Cottrell had wireless, he could have told Column Headquarters the previous night that the enemy was closing in on 50 FSD and that it would be useless and dangerous to attempt to reach it.

But although the unit was not aware of this, it certainly knew all was not well in the south, and **Pryde** went across to Rear Division to say so. He was being assured—as the ASC was so often assured during **CRUSADER**—that there were no enemy tanks for miles and that Battersby was undoubtedly seeing things, when a despatch rider rode in from Supply Column Headquarters with a message that clouds of dust were approaching from the south-south-east and the indications were that they were hostile. It was about this time that news of the raiding of 50 FMC was received, and a prompt order was given to Supply Column to move west forthwith to **Bir el Haleizin**, detaching before it went a group to supply **5 Brigade**, which was still at **Sidi Azeiz**. Nothing was known of what had become of Cottrell's convoy.

‘What a scatter to get going,’ and the Column's departure was given added urgency when an RASC driver pulled in and asked, ‘Have you any

petrol?' Certainly, he was assured. Would he like some. 'No, chum, I don't want any petrol. You'll need it all yourselves. Jerry's about 20 minutes behind me.'

The effect on loading operations was marked. As twenty minutes ticked away, eyes anxiously watched the south, but no one was more perturbed than the remnants of the Italian prisoners of war still on hand. Few load-carrying trucks were available to carry them. Most of them were stowed away among various loads, but when everything was packed and the Column ready to move, a few prisoners of 'little military value' were still on the ground, and were to be left to be collected by the approaching enemy. The prospect did not appeal to them and they became highly excited. Finally, as the trucks began to move off at 3.30 p.m., their feet found wings, and they came pounding through the dust of the convoy and swung themselves aboard wherever they could. Some must have run at least a quarter of a mile and no doubt broke a few records.

When the dust had settled the group left behind to supply **5 Brigade** had the desert to itself. This was another composite ASC group, again under Roberts, and it waited around for half an hour for a section of Ammunition Company to arrive. Lyon was sent out to patrol the eastern approaches.

While the group was waiting around it was decided to blow up a nearby German ammunition dump. Several attempts were made before the dump caught, just as the Ammunition Company detachment arrived. The whole group moved away to a pyrotechnic send-off.

There were two other absentees from Supply Column on its move west. At 10 a.m. Demouth had set out for the supply point, now located seven miles south of **Trigh Capuzzo**, and Latimer was away with a convoy carrying prisoners and about seventy British wounded.

Darkness closed down before Supply Column reached **Bir el Haleizin**, and behind the jolting trucks, flares, so beloved by the enemy—brilliant

reds, greens and oranges—were sprouting. As the new area was approached artillery was whipping the night and machine guns were chattering. Not far away the infantry was getting ready for the final breakthrough to **Tobruk**. At 9 p.m. 18 and 20 Battalions advanced on **Belhamed**. Two hours later 21, 24, 25 and 26 Battalions thrust at the escarpment above the **Sidi Rezegh** mosque, intending to go through to **Ed Duda**. In the **Tobruk** salient the besieged garrison made a thrust outwards to **Ed Duda**. The fighting went on throughout 26 November and it was not until early on the morning of 27 November that **19 Battalion** (and not 21 and 26 Battalions as had been planned) reached **Ed Duda**, gained by the **Tobruk** forces the previous afternoon. So on the morning of 27 November the New Zealanders held the way open to **Tobruk** and had possession of two of the three escarpments that formed terraces inland towards the Libyan plateau. Fourth Brigade held the high ground from **Zaafraan** to **Belhamed** and **Ed Duda**. Sixth Brigade, on Point 175 and the escarpment above **Sidi Rezegh**, held the second escarpment. But the enemy was still on the third and southernmost escarpment and was making good use of his observation.

Throughout all this Supply Column was not very comfortably placed. If it had previously been too close to the fire for comfort, it was now in the centre of a thoroughly stirred-up pot, and it could be fairly sure that in whichever direction it turned it would meet trouble. With enemy tanks astride the supply lines, the supply situation became serious, and rations were cut by half and the water ration reduced to a quart a day a man for all purposes; not much is left when you have to cook and fill the radiator. Beards began to sprout.

From the time the Column halted at what was presumed to be **Bir el Haleizin** on the night of 25 November there were worries. The first was whether, in this lively part of the desert, the unit was in its correct location. After travelling by compass and speedometer, there could be no way of telling until daylight permitted a resection to be made. Morning showed that the unit was just short of where it should be.

There were plenty of other worries. A count showed that all that

were present of Supply Column were three officers, **Pryde**, Quirk and **McLaughlin**, ¹⁹ fifty-one other ranks and nine vehicles. Cottrell was still missing, and at 8.30 a.m. Latimer turned up with three vehicles to report that Demouth and seven other vehicles were missing and were probably captured. Latimer had spent the night with tanks on his heels and had come home with a splintered but still intact windshield and a broken pistol. An attempt to smash the windscreen to give better vision during the night flight had been a proving test for triplex glass.

Demouth, however, was not a prisoner and was himself wondering what had become of Latimer. Since he had left the unit the previous day Demouth's wanderings had taken him far. He located the supply point easily enough at midday on the 25th, only to find from Watt, who had arrived earlier, that it had been moved forward. They were searching for the new supply point when, at 2 p.m., Watt learned that Latimer was at the previous supply point, and as the divisional administration group was about to move west to its new area at **Bir el Haleizin**, Watt instructed Demouth to intercept Latimer and guide him there. But by the time Demouth reached the old supply point, Latimer had gone off to **13 Corps** Headquarters. Demouth overtook him there at 6 p.m. It was now too late to return to Supply Column Headquarters that day, and Demouth decided to assist Latimer.

Latimer's convoy, which consisted of five Supply Column trucks and some **4 Brigade** vehicles, had picked up wounded and prisoners from an advanced dressing station near **Sidi Rezegh** and, on instructions from Colonel Maxwell, had set out to take them to **30 Corps**. En route Latimer encountered a British tank and was told that Bir Gubi had been overrun and that he should go to **13 Corps** instead. Thirteenth Corps, however, declined to take over Latimer's load, and although flares were visible in the direction of **Sidi Azeiz**, a brigadier told Latimer to go to **5 NZ Field Ambulance**.

The convoy set out, but when an enemy concentration was sighted ahead, put about and returned to **13 Corps**. Latimer said he would

attempt to get the wounded through but would not take the prisoners. The brigadier emphatically assured Latimer that the place was not surrounded—the old story—but agreed to take over the prisoners.

Away went the convoy again along **Trigh Capuzzo**, with Demouth at the head and Latimer at the tail. It was now dark, and about five miles to the east, when not far from **Sidi Azeiz**, the head of the convoy ran right into a panzer laager. Upon them before he was aware of their presence, Demouth ran through the tank lines and past Germans standing smoking by their vehicles, swung about and headed back towards the convoy again. As he emerged a green flare glowed up behind him, and the whole convoy put about and fled west. Somewhere in this scramble for safety the convoy split. Latimer, heading west along **Trigh Capuzzo**, came across an anti-tank screen about two miles along the road and warned them that tanks were nearby. He pushed on for three or four miles, and when he stopped to check his convoy, tanks fired on him from the rear.

Thinking these were the same tanks that had been encountered earlier and that Demouth and the others had been overrun, Latimer set off again. The following tanks put up flares, bronze and white, from which it seemed that there were half a dozen or so of them. The convoy left **Trigh Capuzzo** and made tracks for **Gambut**. Another group of tanks appeared from the south.

At dawn Latimer turned his convoy, and passing barely 200 yards from the nearest German tank, set a course for **Bir el Haleizin**.

Demouth, meantime, had bivouacked for the night with the remainder of the vehicles. In the morning, of course, he could see no sign of the others, and started to think about what he was going to do with the wounded. G Branch **13 Corps** Headquarters could not even tell him where he could get urgently needed petrol, water and rations. At last he came across 4 and 5 NZ Field Ambulances about four miles west of **Sidi Azeiz**, just as they were on the point of moving out. These units took over the wounded, and because of the strain this sudden influx

placed upon their transport, Demouth put his vehicles at the disposal of **5 Field Ambulance** until the hospital was shifted. He finished this task at 3 p.m. and reached Column Headquarters an hour later.

All except Cottrell were now either present or accounted for.

The Column now was casting about for fresh supplies. Since Cottrell had not returned and all supply lines were blocked, nothing had been received for two days. At 3 p.m. this day (26 November) Division advised Column Headquarters that **Trigh Capuzzo** was clear as far east as **Sidi Azeiz** and that a convoy was to be sent immediately to 51 FSD, a new depot, in **13 Corps'** area.

No. 1 Echelon, under Morris, was selected for this task. When he received his instructions, Morris reported to Colonel Crump that the area concerned had been under fire the previous day. Crump showed him a situation report declaring the area clear. But Morris was not entirely convinced. Before starting he arranged with his second-in-command, Rawle, that if trouble was encountered Morris would give three long blasts on his car horn and signal a change of direction. Each vehicle was to turn and set off at full speed and in line.

‘This was the only time I ever lined up all the drivers and went through this preliminary drill to ensure perfection,’ says Morris. ‘Oddly enough it was the only occasion I was ever called upon to make this manœuvre.’

The trucks set off on the high ground above the escarpment south of **Trigh Capuzzo**. Trouble soon came—from an unexpected quarter. About forty Marylands came over and, presumably mistaking the trucks for a German convoy, let go their bombs. No one was hurt, and an explanation was forthcoming shortly afterwards. Three armoured cars halted Morris and told him he was in enemy-held territory. He explained what he was doing and was allowed to go on.

A few miles further on shellbursts blossomed to the left. At first it was thought they were overs from a tank battle near **Gambut**, but when

shells began to fall among vehicles, there was no doubt about for whom they were intended. Morris 'pounced' on the horn and as he signalled the trucks swung south. 'I was grateful the drivers were so cool,' says Morris. As the vehicles turned south Rawle looked across to Morris, grinned, and gave the thumbs-up sign.

About two miles to the south the convoy swung left, halted to check course, and set off again. The journey was continued into the night. A few miles from where 51 FSD should have been, the convoy met another column of trucks heading west. This was **13 Corps** Headquarters, which was leaving, Morris was told by Major **Sanders**,²⁰ because things were getting a shade hot. The area where 51 FSD was to have been opened was still held by the enemy. Sanders advised Morris to fall in behind **13 Corps** Headquarters, and he willingly complied.

In darkness, with enemy flares in the sky to every point of the compass, the group moved west along **Trigh Capuzzo**. When they reached what Morris, by dead reckoning, considered was the **Gambut** area, he decided to leave **13 Corps** and head straight for home. Rawle demurred, but Morris had his way.

When the mileage ran out they stopped. There was neither sight nor sound of troops, but flares were still everywhere, and talking in cautious whispers the drivers crept around and prepared to settle down for the rest of the night. Suddenly, bright flame flared up: a driver trying to start a primus in his truck had set the vehicle alight. Sergeant **Braimbridge**²¹ donned a respirator, dived into the burning truck and soon had it out. At that moment he was the most popular man in the unit.

'I shall never forget waking up and looking into the guns of an armoured troop camped alongside,' Morris recalls. 'It was in or out, now, so if we were to be captured let us get it over. I went over to the troop leader, and luck was with us—they were Tommy armoured cars who were waiting for dawn to shoot up what they imagined was a Hun convoy.'

About 500 yards away were the New Zealand lines. Morris returned to the unit to learn that after his departure the previous day information had come to hand that 51 FSD was 'non est'.

So three days had gone by without fresh supplies. Further east Roberts and his **5 Brigade** Company were in the thick of it. This company took much the same form as the earlier **6 Brigade** Company; it consisted of C Section of Ammunition Company (Second-Lieutenant Butt), B and H Sections of Supply Column (Sergeant **Baldwin**²² and Second-Lieutenant Lyon) and six vehicles from B Section 4 RMT carrying water.

Clearing **Abiar Nza Ferigh** at 4 p.m. on 25 November, the company had moved north-east towards **Sidi Azeiz**, where **5 Brigade** was located. Four miles south of **Sidi Azeiz** enemy AFVs were sighted and were reported by Roberts on his arrival at **5 Brigade** Headquarters at 5.30 p.m. At 1 a.m. the company was ordered to go to **22 Battalion**'s area at Sghifet el Charruba, below the escarpment. This was reached at 6 a.m.

This battalion was now eating the first of three days' reserve ration, and on learning of the precarious supply position from Roberts, the battalion's second-in-command, Major **Greville**,²³ placed the unit on half rations. Roberts took over a dump of German food consisting of a three-ton load of *Trinkwasser* (drinking water) in jerricans (the excellent German water or petrol containers), tins of hard biscuits and packets of cellophane-wrapped black bread. Unfortunately it was known that the Germans were suffering from gastric trouble, and for fear of contamination it was decided not to allow New Zealand units to use German rations or water.

The morning was uneventful, but about midday an enemy column of about 3000 vehicles—trucks and tanks—was seen moving between **22 Battalion**'s positions and **5 Brigade** Headquarters. Drivers set to work concealing their trucks as well as they could.

Roberts and Lyon climbed to the top of the escarpment to watch the

column stream by. The Bren carriers of the Divisional Cavalry and of **5 Brigade** were having an exhilarating time. Concealed by the dust, they would rush in, shoot up trucks and anything else with a thin skin, and dart back to safety before the next armoured vehicles came along. In the course of the afternoon between forty and fifty German prisoners and a number of released British prisoners were brought in to Roberts to be transported to appropriate places. The unfortunate Keppel was not one of those released.

Late in the afternoon two enemy tanks came prowling in towards **22 Battalion's** area from the west, but when two guns of **7 Anti-Tank Regiment** began pumping out shells they shied off, to the obvious disappointment of German prisoners.

At dusk the enemy column was still passing, and at 8.30 p.m. Roberts's composite ASC company was ordered to move to **5 Brigade Headquarters**. This, of course, involved crossing the route where the panzers had been passing, and five armoured cars commanded by a Divisional Cavalry officer were provided as an escort.

Confident that replenishments would be available that night or next day, Roberts handed over his group's remaining two days' reserve ration before leaving **22 Battalion**.

One by one in creeper gear the trucks crawled along the track up the escarpment. At the top they assembled and set off for **Sidi Azeiz**, reached without incident at midnight. Here Roberts was told to take his group to **50 FSD** to load up with food, water and 25-pounder ammunition, which was the first requirement of the brigade. The Divisional Cavalry was then out on a reconnaissance and was expected back at any moment to report whether the route was clear. By 1 a.m. no report had come in, but Brigadier Hargest was anxious for the convoy to get away immediately and return as soon as possible. The staff captain remarked that there was no reason to believe that any enemy remained on the route as it appeared that the enemy movement to **Bardia** had been completed.

The convoy set off at 1.30 a.m., still without any knowledge of what lay ahead. With it went A Section of Ammunition Company under Captain **Gibson**,²⁴ who had come to **Sidi Azeiz** in search of the non-existent 51 FSD. Ammunition trucks that were part of the **5 Brigade** Company and of Gibson's section that were loaded up were left behind.

Roberts's plan was to move south-west to Trigh el Abd and then turn east through the frontier wire at Bir Sheferzen. The convoy moved south cautiously; ahead were reconnaissance vehicles that reported in every two miles, and in consequence the whole convoy of more than 100 vehicles had to halt every two miles to await reports. Finally a halt was called for the night. When he resumed in daylight Roberts had cause to be thankful he had stopped.

Soon after daybreak, as the convoy was approaching Bir Uaar enemy motor transport was seen moving east directly across the line of advance. Then two AFVs appeared from the east, and from the west came fire from tanks. The convoy put about. 'Our encounter showed what folly it would have been to have attempted to move over 100 vehicles through the narrow gap in the wire during the night,' says Roberts. 'The Germans would have had a good bag of PW, and more valuable to them would have been the transport.'

Roberts headed back for **5 Brigade** Headquarters, but at that moment this was no place for anyone who valued his life and freedom. At 7.10 a.m. the Germans had descended on **Sidi Azeiz**. They poured in fire for over an hour, then sent in their tanks. When the returning convoy reached Bir el Maraa, seven miles to the south-west, 'the early morning scene was one of fire, flame, smoke and dust'. **Sidi Azeiz** was virtually ringed by enemy vehicles, and a column could be seen moving north-west from the direction of **Capuzzo**. Headquarters **5 Brigade** was clearly no place to go.

But where could they go? The location of the headquarters of 23 and 28 Battalions was known, but as these battalions were deployed in the **Sollum- Capuzzo** areas there was no hope of reaching them. Roberts

began to make an arc around the **Sidi Azeiz** area with the intention of joining **22 Battalion**, but he had travelled only about seven miles when, near Point 211, more enemy AFVs appeared and small-arms fire came crackling in.

‘The large number of vehicles moving east and west in the area north of **Trigh Capuzzo** were obviously searching in a wide arc from **Sidi Azeiz**,’ Roberts recalls. ‘It appeared to me at the time that the enemy was isolating **22 Battalion**.’

Roberts at first considered trying to dodge the enemy during the daylight hours and return to **5 Brigade** Headquarters that night, but fortunately he had insufficient petrol. The enemy had a clear run along **Trigh Capuzzo**, and he decided to return to **Bir el Haleizin**; his plan was to travel on a west-south-west course until he could turn due north to his destination.

With anxious eyes towards the north, where large concentrations of moving vehicles could be seen, Roberts moved his convoy. It soon became apparent that he was well tangled up. Besides the enemy transport to the north, which was the panzers returning west from the frontier, there were scattered groups of armoured cars to the south, also travelling west. These at the time were thought to be a flank guard for the panzers, boxing the convoy into a hostile corridor, and as the uncomfortable journey progressed their actions were certainly unfriendly. But from the evidence of later events and the tactics employed, it seems more likely that the armoured cars were in fact British and that they in turn believed the New Zealand convoy to be German.

‘With nightmarish regularity we were compelled to head our thin-skinned vehicles to the north to avoid armoured cars approaching from the south,’ says Roberts. ‘The interception tactics employed by the armoured cars were to race across the path of the convoy in a north-west direction and about half a mile in front. As the convoy got closer they would open fire. The convoy would slow down and more cars would

appear from the south.'

To the drivers the convoy was 'like a hunted fox, running from earth to earth and finding them all blocked'.

About 11 a.m., when the convoy was near Ghot el Mahata, three tanks approached from the south and, moving west across the tail of the convoy, opened fire. Somewhere in the dust and confusion Lyon's Dodge pick-up disappeared.

A few miles further on the southern fringe of a tank battle again forced a halt. Left, front and right there was a milling mass of tanks in a pall of smoke and dust. Roberts, Gibson and Butt had a quick conference, but in the confusion could not identify friend or foe.

They decided that, after allowing for diversions, they had more than run the estimated distance to [Bir el Haleizin](#), and they turned about and moved east in search of a clear run north. They had not gone far before they were compelled to turn south, and very soon they were halted by armoured cars. 'This is it, we thought.' But they were cars of a British armoured brigade.

A tank officer took Roberts to the brigade headquarters. The brigadier declined to give Roberts the location reference, but told him to move three miles west and then fourteen miles north to the New Zealand Division. He was at that moment lining up his armour for a battle, and he passed Roberts over to a major, who took what he wanted from Roberts's story. Roberts was being escorted back to the convoy when a terrific bellow was heard from behind. They turned to find the brigadier calling them back. He pointed with his stick to the convoy. 'What's that transport over there?' Roberts said meekly that it was his. 'Take your bloody prams off my battlefield,' he roared.

'We started our move in mighty quick time,' reports Roberts. This time it was for home, although 'home' had meanwhile shifted from its previous location at [Bir el Haleizin](#).

Lyon, all this while, was guest of the King's Dragoon Guards; he had good cause to worry about the fate of the main convoy. Limping along with a broken spring tied up with rope, he had been intercepted by an armoured car that had forced him to halt with a Bren burst across his bows. He had difficulty at first persuading the NCO in charge that he was a New Zealander. The reason became apparent when he was taken to headquarters; Roberts's convoy had been reported as an enemy column since early morning, presumably because it was following the same general line as the German forces. Lyon was told by a colonel that the convoy was heading directly towards a German concentration.

Compelled meanwhile to remain with the KDG unit, Lyon was joined by an Ammunition Company man with his truck, and later two other quite sound abandoned Ammunition Company trucks were recovered. One had a full petrol tank. The New Zealanders assisted by carrying ammunition, and during a bombing raid Lyon's driver, **Marshall**,²⁵ was wounded. Eventually Lyon, with a borrowed driver, set off with a British convoy for **Tobruk**, but the Corridor was closed, and it was not until Supply Column returned to **Fuka** when the New Zealanders were withdrawn that Lyon rejoined it.

At the time when Roberts's convoy was darting about the desert on its harassed homeward run, another Supply Column convoy that had been having a rather similar experience was also on its way home. This convoy was a little ahead of Roberts. It was, in fact, ahead of Supply Column Headquarters, and when the Column moved to a new location on 27 November it found this convoy waiting for it. It was Cottrell's. He had been three days away from his unit and was more than forty-eight hours overdue—but he had rations, the first to come in since the 24th.

Cottrell had set out for 50 FSD from **Abiar Nza Ferigh** at 10.15 a.m. on the 24th with all the available No. 2 Echelon trucks—fifteen in all—and five captured German trucks, which were all in poor mechanical order. The convoy carried 500 German and Italian prisoners for the prisoner-of-war cage at 50 FMC.

The convoy had not gone far before the German trucks began to give trouble, and after repeated breakdowns, two carrying tires and petrol were abandoned with the intention that they would be reclaimed on the return journey. The cage was reached at 4 p.m., but by the time the prisoners had been disposed of it was nearly 5.30 p.m. and growing dark. In the next hour and a half rations for two brigade groups were loaded. Then through the darkness came the rumble of trucks, and in the distance could be seen burning vehicles around which **RAF** planes were angrily buzzing. A host of South African trucks went roaring by, some dragging camouflage nets behind them. As they went by a voice called, 'Go like hell, chum, the Jerries are coming.' The issuing staff at the FSD promptly left. Cottrell called his men together and told them that the route back was blocked. Together with some **YMCA** trucks, he took the convoy first south for about ten miles and then west through another gap in the wire.

Behind them *21 Panzer Division* was descending on 50 FMC. From his dugout on the top of a hillock the New Zealander in charge of the centre, Major **Closey**,²⁶ watched the Germans sack some of the dumps and gave a running commentary of the raid to Rear Headquarters Eighth Army.

As soon as Cottrell crossed the border he ran into enemy advanced elements, and he pushed west with flares on his right marking a barrier parallel with his course. After 15 miles he turned north, but flares were now all around him, and he drew his convoy in. While drivers rested in their cabs, escorting infantry were posted around the laager.

Burning vehicles could be seen to the north, but a reconnaissance party found they were too far away to reach. Throughout the night tracked vehicles could be heard growling and clattering as they passed nearby, some within 200 yards, and flares were flashing in the darkness, suggesting that the enemy was searching for the convoy.

In this inhospitable region the trucks huddled together under the cover of darkness in a wadi for the rest of the night. At first light, with a

bitter wind tugging at the canopies, the vehicles set off in open desert formation through a light mist towards the north. Black objects came into view on the horizon. Two Hurricanes flew over, appeared to examine Cottrell's convoy, waggled their wings and turned away to the north. As they swept over the black objects, ack-ack fire went up, and the heavy hammer of machine guns could be heard. The convoy put about, 'bully and biscuit tins just a jumble in the back of the old three tonners', and as it was turning three enemy armoured cars appeared on the left. The Hurricanes circled the enemy group until the New Zealanders had turned.

Now travelling south, the New Zealanders saw a number of trucks away to the right. Several vehicles broke away from the right of the convoy to investigate. As they approached the unidentified group a staff car made off, but the remaining vehicles, a captured South African truck and three German trucks, were secured, together with fourteen Germans.

Cottrell went back to the site of the previous night's laager, which was in a wadi, and was reassembling when trucks of a type not previously seen were observed crossing diagonally. Rifles came down from the racks and preparations were made to do battle, but as the convoy came nearer a small vehicle came in towards the wadi and a man in Scottish uniform could be seen waving. The vehicles were identified as a supply column going forward.

After reforming his convoy Cottrell struck out for 62 FSD, about eight miles to the north-west. This was reached without incident, but a Dodge pick-up with Corporal **Chinn**²⁷ and Driver **Pitt**,²⁸ who had been bringing up the rear, was missing. At 62 FSD the prisoners were handed over, rations drawn for the third brigade group and the recaptured South African truck loaded with petrol. Cottrell was advised not to attempt to break through on his own but to contact a tank brigade at Fort Maddalena, away to the south.

Fort Maddalena was found to be deserted. The tanks had gone and on

the airfield some Hurricanes were still burning from a recent raid. There was not even a compass to be 'salvaged' from the aircraft; someone had already done the job.

The wandering convoy set off through the darkness again. There was another alarm when the vehicles came across an unidentified group, and for a few tense moments, with rifles ready, the drivers and infantrymen waited. Not a shot was fired; fortunately, the 'attackers' were English.

The tank escort was at last found at 62 FSD. With some tanks on transporters and others ranged along the flanks, the group moved forward in moonlight. Now and then the convoy would halt, tanks would disappear for a short while, fire a few shots, and movement would resume.

Thus escorted, the Supply Column convoy made its way back to the **Tobruk** area. Next morning, before reaching their destination, drivers had a glimpse of another side of the war. At a field dressing station medical staff were seen attending to British and German wounded alike. There were many freshly dug New Zealand graves to be seen.

The Hareifet en-Nbeidat area was reached that morning, and as the rest of Supply Column had not yet arrived, Cottrell reported to Command NZASC. Cottrell was safely home—or as safe as any part of the desert could be at this time. It was a creditable performance that earned him the MC; the convoy had escaped capture and brought back the long-awaited rations, captured fifteen prisoners and four enemy trucks, and recaptured a British vehicle. Cottrell, however, had one complaint. He ends his report on the convoy: 'The recaptured South African vehicle was taken over, without my consent, by a platoon of 24 NZ Bn.' Which shows that honest endeavour does not always bring its reward.

Now the enemy armour was returning. Hard-pressed by the New Zealand Division and 70 Division, the *German Afrika Division* (soon to be renamed *90 Light Division*) and the Italian infantry divisions were clamouring for tank support and, in response, the two German and one

Italian armoured divisions came rolling back. Along the **Trigh Capuzzo** on 27 November **15 Panzer Division** received a sharp rebuff from the British armour but was able to make ground during the night and embark on a sweep around the southern flank of New Zealand Division, while **21 Panzer Division**, greatly weakened by the fighting thus far, moved against the eastern flank between **Ed Dbana** and Point 175.

In the circumstances a change of location of the administration group was prudent. Supply Column received orders at 8.30 p.m. on 26 November to move to Hareifet en-Nbeidat, south-west of Point 175. The move was to begin at 8.30 a.m. on the 27th, but the unexpected return of Morris's convoy that morning delayed the unit an hour.

As the Column moved west, British tanks were seen to the north moving east, and a few passed through the convoy. Enemy AFVs were sighted to the south. As they began to converge slowly on the Column, the course was changed to north, but the enemy tanks continued to close. Bofors of 43 NZ Light Anti-Aircraft Battery, which was attached to the administration group, moved out to that flank, but before they came into action a detachment of I tanks lumbered up and the enemy veered away to the south.

When the Column reached its new area at 11.30 a.m. Cottrell was waiting with 18,600 rations. A supply point was established immediately in the unit area and detailed issues made.

For the rest, 27 November was quiet and in general the next day was still comparatively so. The enemy's main activity around the **Tobruk Corridor** was a series of tentative probes—but there were tank battles to the south and the east. Unfortunately for Supply Column and for the whole administration group, part of these tank battles were fought over the ground they occupied.

Every Supply Column man who was there will remember that morning, each in his own way. The war diary in the studied understatement of 'officialese' records it like this: 'At 0700 hours an

adjoining RTC unit reported that an enemy tank concentration had been located some 2/3 miles to the west and south. Our tanks were about to engage them and in order to give them room to manoeuvre they desired the area occupied by the Admin Gp cleared as soon as possible.'

Morris was 'having breakfast in the company lines at 6.30 a.m. when a brigadier from **13 Corps**, complete with white sheep-skin overcoat, pointed to the horizon in the east and said that dust clouds were Rommel's tanks and we had better move due south as we were on the forthcoming battle arena. There was no time to finish eating. We dived for our vehicles and made off in the direction of Column HQ.'

Quirk 'was awakened early by a tank sergeant in an armoured car who advised me to shift my transport as the German tanks were on the horizon and our own tanks, who were just behind us, wanted to engage them on our camping ground after breakfast. There didn't seem any place left to go.'

Driver Hyland still hadn't had his breakfast when a tank rolled up and an officer told him, 'I say, old chap, would you mind moving? You're going to spoil a perfectly good tank battle.'

Sergeant Johnson had returned to the Supply Column area after failing to meet trucks at the supply point when a Dingo breezed up, and a man asked, 'What unit is this, chum?' When Johnson cautiously asked to see his paybook, the man replied, 'Never mind paybook. Bloody Hun's half a mile over the ridge.'

Driver Coulson was a man who believed in keeping 'the engine well warmed up. A tank battle to the south of us. A few 25 pounders among our trucks firing south-east and west. We move again....'

By the calculation of a senior British officer, the administration group was more or less at the point of impact of the opposing groups of armour. It was, Quirk recalls, like schoolboy disputes over which game was being played where at Hagley Park, **Christchurch**.

The enemy concentration could be seen through binoculars to the south-west, and British tanks were already parading through the New Zealand transport and heading out into the desert in Battle of **Waterloo** style. However, apparently everyone was not aware a tank battle was imminent. Quirk, looking for the brigadier of **22 Armoured Brigade**, encountered a captain, apparently a tank workshops officer, who was brewing up. Quirk mentioned that he believed 'you are going to have a tank battle here in a few minutes'.

'The hell!' exploded the officer, visibly put out. 'The bastards never told me. It's my day for maintenance and inspection.'

Shells were falling in the area as the transport moved off. A Hurricane swooping low across the head of the column caused a swing to the right, and the plane waggled its wings approvingly. From Rear Divisional Headquarters, to which **Pryde** had sent an officer, came word to go to a new area allotted to the administration group at **Ed Dbana**, five miles north of Divisional Headquarters. This lay between two escarpments and was supposedly screened from enemy observation. **Pryde** went down to flag the area, but found Ammunition Company already in possession. He selected another area half a mile to the east and with his batman, **Amtman**²⁹ was flagging sub-unit areas when shells came in from the west. **Pryde** went to **Rear Divisional Headquarters** and was questioned by the CRA, Brigadier Miles, on the location of the guns. Miles thought some of his batteries could neutralise the enemy fire, but in a consultation with Colonel Crump it was agreed to move Supply Column's area further west. On the lower ground the trucks were 'camouflaged away' as best they could be in every hollow.

In its new position Supply Column was closer to the tank battle than was previously intended. The men could watch two tank groups milling about under a clouded sky, and occasionally overs came their way.

The tank battle sounded as though it was moving away about midday, and that is just what happened. As the battle moved south the

New Zealand flank was left open, and enemy detachments eventually moved in and occupied the main dressing station and the escarpment overlooking **Divisional Headquarters** and the administration group. During the afternoon Corporal Baldwin and a driver left with rations for the main dressing station but were turned back by **General Freyberg**. At 2.30 p.m. three Supply Column men, Corporal **Buchan** ³⁰ and Drivers **Trill** ³¹ and **Sibley**, ³² went off to take captured German rations to a prisoner-of-war cage near Divisional Headquarters. They were last seen inspecting German prisoners of war who were shortly afterwards liberated by their own forces.

By late afternoon it was obvious that things were not going very well, and **Pryde** was not surprised when he was summoned to Command NZASC and told to destroy all codes and secret documents, and to be ready to follow Headquarters NZASC after dark.

When the Column had begun to settle down for the night, it wasn't aware the MDS and prisoner-of-war cage had been captured, and in the evening Morris and Rawle decided to go out to investigate what appeared to be **30 Corps** moving out to the west on the New Zealand flank. They worked their way forward on their stomachs, and tracer came flying down from the escarpment that they had left that morning and fell just short of them. 'We thought the boys of the MDS were being frivolous,' says Morris. However, they identified the moving vehicles that they had seen as German, and hurried back to report to **Pryde**, who with Watt was trying to keep out the cold with a bottle of Scotch. Simultaneously a runner arrived with the message, 'Proceed due west until further instructions.'

In any circumstances this would have been a bewildering order; on this night, with flares and tracer streaked across the sky in all directions, it was slightly frightening. It was not as vague as it sounded at the time, however. A due westward course would take Supply Column past **Zaafraan** and **Belhamed** to **Ed Duda**, where guides were waiting to show it the route through the Corridor and into **Tobruk**. But the destination was not yet known to Supply Column.

The Column had been on one and a half hours' notice to move since 6.30 p.m. and all vehicles were ready, but neither officers nor men were. Many were sound asleep and were awakened with difficulty. What followed will again be remembered by all those who took part in that mad scramble across thirty miles of desert and through the narrow Corridor into **Tobruk**. The night was pitch black, enemy flares were close on either side, there was only a tape to follow—not always that—and the desert was strewn with minefields.

All went reasonably well until **Ed Duda** (Watt remembers). After that many are the claims...‘I was first into **Tobruk**.’...‘I was last into **Tobruk**.’...‘I picked up the tape and ran for bloody miles.’...‘I missed the tape but got there by instinct.’...The truth was that providence plus the tape laid by the sappers landed a bewildered Supply Column in **Tobruk**. Drivers did lose their way, officers did fall asleep, did lose their head, but luck was with us and we gazed open mouthed at the holes, guns, sea and rubble that was **Tobruk**.

That runs probably as close to the recollection of that night journey held by many men as anything. But for all the confusion and blind ignorance it wasn't—couldn't have been—such a haphazard drive as it must have seemed to many.

Acting on instructions similar to those received by Supply Column, all ASC companies moved west to **Ed Duda**. A series of guides from **13 Corps** and from the **Tobruk** garrison showed the way. Shell flashes and flares broke the darkness, and the Column followed a course over hillocks and down escarpments, weaving between trenches containing bodies—in reality sleeping men, missing death only through the skill of the ASC drivers—and through lines of armoured cars and I tanks. Small-arms fire was singing overhead. Guides would lead so far, then hand over to the next guide at a key point, but at one point there was no guide to hand Supply Column on to. The missing man should have taken the convoy to a white tape and guided it through a minefield.

We found the tape ourselves, and when we were all in the centre of the minefield it ran out (says Morris). As we had been zig zagging around trucks in the pitch black, I decided to investigate how the convoy was making out. Alas, I had four vehicles behind me. **Maj Pryde** was temporarily bogged across some tracks, and of the rest of the Column there was not a sign.

The rest of the Column was at that moment feeling its way in various disjointed sections along the precariously narrow Corridor. Several men who got out to inquire the way from infantrymen were told, 'Jerry's 200 yards in that direction.'

The OC's car was taken in tow by Flannagan II. Told that the rest of the vehicles had gone to the left, Hyland drove for several chains, was warned that he was getting near the enemy, made another turn, and with a variety of other vehicles tagging along behind, set off again. **Pryde**, in his towed staff car, took up station in the rear. Every now and then the trucks would halt as a driver nodded off, and **Pryde** would be towed to the front and would rudely awaken the sleeping man, and away they would go again.

Sergeant Johnson was following Roberts. Whenever the trucks halted, the sergeant would alight and go back to the next truck and ask, 'Are you awake? You walk back to the next one.' And so a chain system of waking the driver of each truck was maintained. One stop, however, was too brief to follow this out, and at the next stop there were only half a dozen trucks behind. Roberts went back and brought up the remainder.

The head of Supply Column, meanwhile, was lodged in the minefield. Morris's station wagon was fitted with an aircraft compass—'salvaged' from a crashed plane—two sun compasses, a full set of maps and even an antiquated sextant, but none of these, he recalls ruefully, was designed to help one out of a minefield in the middle of the night. While his driver, **Ferguson**,³³ stood on the running board and pointed out the tracks, Morris took the wheel and headed in the general direction of **Tobruk**. They emerged onto a clearing on the skyline just as dawn broke.

Others saw them in the half light, and soon there were twenty trucks nose-to-tail. The enemy saw them, too, and shells bracketed the line. They pushed on without delay.



Truck on fire at Fuka
Truck on fire at Fuka



Archie McMillan's LAD
Archie McMillan's LAD



The approach march into Libya, November 1941
The approach march into Libya, November 1941



Workshops Section under shellfire from tanks
Workshops Section under shellfire from tanks

Desert formation near Tobruk



Desert formation near Tobruk

Shell bursting on
The escarpment
above Tobruk



Shell bursting on the escarpment above Tobruk

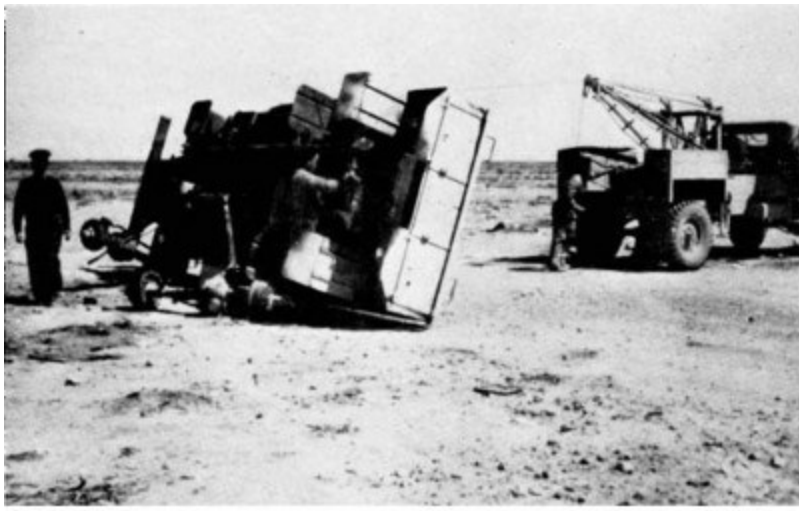
Supply Company
Headquarters near
Tobruk



Supply Company Headquarters near Tobruk



Italian guns near a supply point within the Tobruk defences
Italian guns near a supply point within the Tobruk defences



Rolling a truck at Ed Duda before dismantling for spare parts
Rolling a truck at **Ed Duda** before dismantling for spare parts

Shelling overtook the tail of Supply Column as the day lightened up. The only casualty throughout the march, however, was the postal truck, which was blown up. There was no loss of life.

Tobruk was coming up nicely when Morris drove head-long into another minefield. He turned smartly, with every other vehicle wisely following his tracks.

At the perimeter the convoy ran into a squadron of I tanks. It was all very peaceful. Crews were spreading their blankets to air, and a young subaltern was frying bacon over a primus. Morris halted the trucks and strolled across to inquire the way into **Tobruk**. He marvelled at the unruffled calm of the tankies, for shells were falling fairly close. The English officer was 'so calm I just had to try and be likewise,' says Morris. 'I should have felt better inside that tank. I was asking him where to find a suitable track when a shell landed a few yards on the other side of the tank. He put down his frying pan, had a look around the tank, and murmured, "Getting cheeky, what."'

With as much dignity as he could muster, Morris half ran and half walked to the car. Rawle chuckled as he got in, and they drove off towards **Tobruk**.

Tobruk was a place of contrasts. As the tired-eyed travellers moved

in from the desert it looked picturesque and peaceful, but as they drove on it was revealed as a town of crumbling walls and a harbour of sunken ships. Even so, there was an atmosphere of peace—a remote quietness—until with startling abruptness the garrison's big guns flared into action and the Germans' long-range stuff came rustling back.

Safely based on **Tobruk**, Supply Column was to have continued to supply New Zealand Division from dumps within the perimeter, but events quickly prohibited movement down the slender Corridor, and ultimately two badly mauled brigades of the Division, the 4th and 6th, broke away, together with **General Freyberg's** battle headquarters, and returned to **Egypt**. Supply Column left **Tobruk** only after the siege was broken and the enemy in retreat.

Supplies, however, did reach the beleaguered New Zealand units on the **Sidi Rezegh** escarpment on 29 November. They were carried by an RASC convoy of 300 vehicles, which at first caused alarm as they approached the New Zealanders, who were of course expecting a German attack. The leader of the convoy was Colonel **Clifton**,³⁴ former commander of the New Zealand Engineers and at this time attached to **30 Corps**.

Within **Tobruk** Supply Column soon got about its business. It settled first on the aerodrome. At noon the town was bombed. During the afternoon the unit was dispersed in the area near Marsa Biad, five miles east of **Tobruk**. No. 1 Echelon drew rations during the afternoon and 'broke bulk' in anticipation of a move to **Ed Duda** under the cover of darkness. But by evening it was not clear whether the Corridor was still open.

During the 29th Rommel began operations to cut the Corridor. That afternoon tanks and infantry overran the remnants of **21 Battalion** on Point 175, giving the enemy observation over a large area of New Zealand Division.

Precarious as the position was, the resolve was to hold the Corridor

at all costs. Unfortunately, the analogous use of the word 'cost' in war is often fallacious; the resolute frequently pay so heavily for what they deem necessary that they defeat their own ends. When the 'deal' is done they have neither the 'currency'—men and materials—they were ready to pay, nor the victory for which they were bargaining. The New Zealanders now found themselves in this position. They had paid heavily, had in fact gained what they were seeking, but were now to lose it.

A gravely weakened **6 Brigade** faced the German attack on the afternoon of 30 November. At 4 p.m. the Germans closed in from the west and south, their dust and the blinding sun behind them giving them excellent concealment, and most of 24 and 26 Battalions were overrun. **Sidi Rezegh** was lost. But the Division was still resolved to hold on.

When day dawned on 1 December the Germans had clear observation over our positions, and felt forward again. Their aim was to destroy what was left of the Division. The remaining I tanks and New Zealand 25-pounders and a few anti-aircraft guns beat down the main attack, but **20 Battalion** at **Belhamed** was overrun. The remnants of **6 Brigade**, grouped to the east of the guns, seemed seriously endangered, but British tanks, sent to cover a withdrawal, appeared at the last moment to save the situation. Sixth Brigade withdrew first towards Point 175, where it met heavy fire, and hurriedly turned towards **Zaafraan**, where **4 Brigade** (less the detachments in **Tobruk**) and Divisional Battle Headquarters were grouping. Here, on the afternoon of the 1st, were 3500 men and 700 vehicles. In darkness the New Zealanders broke away and in a tense, night drive went east and then south to **Bir Gibni**.

The Corridor was cut and **Tobruk** was again isolated. Within its perimeter Supply Column was part of a force that the Germans tauntingly called their 'self-supporting prisoners'.

Throughout all this there was very little Supply Column could do. On the 30th it had again drawn rations for the Division and, to reduce

congestion in the Corridor, had loaded these onto No. 1 Echelon trucks, still carrying the undelivered rations drawn the previous day. While the battle raged outside Supply Column knew little of what was happening and could derive only small comfort from laughing at the Italian news bulletin's claim that most of New Zealand Division had been killed and the rest captured by the Italians.

On-the-spot reports, however, were not reassuring. On 1 December Quirk wrote in his diary: 'Fine sunny day. Artillery bombardment opened in our lines 5 a.m. You can plainly hear the shells screaming on their way.... Afternoon to Div re issue of rations. Very gloomy atmosphere. Tanks ran over 6 IB and outlook for 4 IB very gloomy. This means the whole div has been badly cut up.... Heard 20th Bn has surrendered.'

Shells came in close to the Column's lines that night, and enemy planes droned overhead, lighting up the night with flares and bombs. The next day a dull sky and later rain added to the depressing atmosphere, although news about the Division was 'a little better'. A comfortable mess was established in an Italian stone hut complete with fireplace.

There was work to be done inside **Tobruk**, and during the week the Column was there working parties were supplied to unload ships. The harbour was not a healthy spot; enemy aircraft were attentive, and as bombs came down and the terrific **Tobruk** barrage sent up shells which in their turn came down as splinters 'like a New Zealand hail storm', the men working on the lighters felt unhappily naked.

There were compensations. There generally are in supply work. At mid-afternoon one day Supply Column men were discharging a freighter in mid-harbour into barges when rum was discovered. Word soon reached shore. Attempts to smuggle jars off the wharf beneath coats and uniforms were quickly detected, however, and a bolder ruse was decided on. A Supply Column truck was driven onto the wharf—the RASC was actually providing transport from the wharves—loaded up with at least fifty cases, with two jars to the case, and driven away. Thereafter rum

was so plentiful that it was even used for lighting primuses, and there was still some in the unit a year later.

While the Supply Column men were working, the war and the weather changed around them. Quirk noted in his diary:

4 December (Thursday): Bitterly cold with biting wind. Surprised first thing when received orders to pack and stand by. Going out, but don't know how. Saw a Hurricane on the tail of a Hun about 50 feet up and not a quarter of a mile from us. Were they travelling! A few bursts, and the Hun was a patch of dark smoke as he dived into the ground.... After tea to Column mess where I received word I am leaving tomorrow at 1530 by boat with a sergeant and three men. Terrific artillery bombardment all night. Bombers also over, machine-gunned our lines and bombed close by. Clouds low all night.

5 December (Friday): Clear and cold. To Div this morning to get some details. Big shots are flying to Alex.

Tobruk was isolated until 5 December. The enemy tried to break into **Tobruk** and failed; Eighth Army reserves, especially in tanks, were the stronger. He decided to withdraw to the west, and the siege of **Tobruk** was ended.

With most of the Division already **Egypt**-bound, Supply Column had to start thinking about moving back itself, and on 5 December Quirk's advance guard was despatched by sea. This small group was to witness one of the war's smaller tragedies. Among those shut up in **Tobruk** when the Corridor was cut were a number of wounded—British, Australian, South African and New Zealand. Three hundred and eighty of them, including ninety-seven New Zealanders who were mainly stretcher cases, were taken aboard the SS *Chakdina*. Also on board were about twenty-three other New Zealanders, mainly medical staff, and the captured German general, von Ravenstein. In company with SS *Kirkland*, on which the Supply Column men had embarked, the *Chakdina* put out of **Tobruk** at 5 p.m. on the 5th.

A big shell that burst near the wharf and sent up a shower of masonry and brick was their farewell. The ships sailed down the harbour between **Tobruk's** sunken wrecks—'Italian cruisers and big passenger liners burned and beached, and others with just the stern and mast showing'—and out through the heads into the **Mediterranean**.

At 9.30 p.m. there was a sudden shout, a swirl of movement as the crew rushed for the freighter's ack-ack protection—twelve machine guns and a **Breda** gun—and the ship began to spit up into the sky. Then there was a heavy explosion, and another shout, 'The bloody *Chakdina's* gone.' The *Chakdina*, 100 yards away across the moonlit water, was sinking after being hit by a torpedo. In three and a half minutes the water had closed over her. Then there was another explosion and the sea boiled as the submerged boilers burst. Few below deck escaped and others were drowned when the fast-sinking ship dragged them down.

The plane responsible was still droning about, but a destroyer and a corvette streaked onto the scene and allayed fears of another attack. While the naval craft picked up survivors, the *Kirkland* continued on her way. Her passengers and crew spent an unhappy night standing fully dressed and with lifebelts on.

British fighters came over when it became light, and the *Kirkland* bobbed across the swell in comparative safety. At 5 p.m., as the light was failing again, two planes were seen lurking in the low cloud, apparently waiting a chance to make a broadside-on run at the ship. The *Kirkland* opened up 'like a Chinese festival', the crew firing while soldiers filled the belts. Nearby naval craft joined in. For almost an hour the *Kirkland* twisted and turned and erupted ack-ack fire. The aircraft made three attempts: one torpedo went across the bow and two behind the stern.

The merchant seamen, Quirk remembers, were the 'bravest and finest chaps I have ever seen. Bosun, cabin boy, mess waiter, galley steward and cooks manned the guns as quietly and efficiently as if they were going about their usual jobs, and they enjoyed every second of an

encounter in which they could get a smack at the Hun.' At **Alexandria** the *Kirkland* had her reward in the form of a message flashed across from the Navy, 'Well done, *Kirkland*.'

Quirk and his men went back to **Fuka** to await the rest of the unit.

Back at **Tobruk** some reorganisation was going on. Since **5 Brigade** was in the field it would have to be supplied, and for this purpose another **5 Brigade** Company, consisting of No. 2 Echelon under Roberts, was established on the night of 7–8 December. However, it was not detached until ASC units moved back to **El Beida** on 8 December. The next day the bulk of the Column continued eastwards while **5 Brigade** Company remained at **El Beida** to await an Ammunition Company detachment.

There was a mild petrol crisis at **El Beida**. The New Zealand liaison officer at Eighth Army Rear Headquarters said there was no petrol and oil for refuelling nearer than **Bir el Thalata**, and after a lot of high-level discussion Colonel Crump decided that the convoy should risk going on to **Charing Cross**, where vehicles with fuel from **Bir el Thalata** would meet it.

During 9 December, while still awaiting the ammunition detachment, there was nothing to do but vehicle maintenance, and Roberts and Latimer went off to have a look at 50 FMC, a few miles to the north, from which Cottrell had fled on the evening of 24 November as German forces descended on it. They were surprised to find two RASC men in charge of the petrol dump, which was intact. The FMC had not suffered as much harm as Cottrell had feared. So there was plenty of petrol after all to replenish the convoy.

The main part of the Column rejoined Quirk and his group at **Fuka** on the afternoon of 9 December.

The most desperate part of the battle in **Libya** was now over, and although there was still fighting to be done, the enemy was falling back. There was one final struggle before the line came to rest at **El Agheila**.

¹ **'X' lists: men posted to a headquarters or extra-regimental unit; men evacuated to hospital; prisoners of war and men serving detention or imprisonment; unposted reinforcements.**

² **Maj L. W. Roberts, MBE, ED, m.i.d.; Auckland; born Wellington, 4 Sep 1911; clerk; OC 2 Amn Coy 1943, 1 Sup Coy 3 Oct 1945-18 Jan 1946; Regular soldier.**

³ **WO II T. A. Beer; Spreydon; born London, 22 Sep 1902, transport driver.**

⁴ **Capt D. H. Goulden, m.i.d.; born Southbridge, 15 Dec 1917; motor mechanic.**

⁵ **An important innovation for CRUSADER campaign was a Corps organisation for co-ordinating supply and maintenance of the fighting formations, known as a field maintenance centre. This would contain an FSD, a field ammunition depot, a petrol, oil and lubricants dump, a water point, a prisoner-of-war cage, a field post office, a NAAFI/EFI store (for canteen supplies), and other services, all functioning independently but making economical use of a common labour and transport pool and subject to the headquarters of the FMC for the initial layout of the whole area, the marking of routes and traffic control, local administration, security, and general co-ordination. Each corps had several of these FMCs, those of 13 Corps numbering from 50 upwards and those of 30 Corps numbering from 60 upwards, with the chief components similarly numbered. Thus 50 FMC, just inside Egypt and three miles east of the frontier wire at El Beida, included 50 FSD, 50 FAD, and so on. As it happened this FMC had a NZ headquarters—'A' NZ FMC—and the co-ordination was therefore carried out by New Zealanders, although the dumps and services were operated by troops from the United Kingdom. The headquarters of another NZ FMC—'B'—was at that time waiting at 50 FMC to move forward and set up 51 FMC some 20 miles west of Sidi Omar. Some idea of the enormous size of these installations can be gained from the fact that 50 FMC covered an area of 35 square miles. So wide was the dispersion and so**

effective the camouflage that a German armoured division later drove through the northern fringe of this area without realising that the supplies and services for the whole British corps lay within its reach.

⁶ **Capt F. G. Butt, m.i.d.; Seddon; born Blenheim, 8 Dec 1913; farmer.**

⁷ **Capt W. J. Daniel, m.i.d.; Auckland; born England, 15 Aug 1912; accountant; wounded 25 May 1941; p.w. 22 Nov 1941.**

⁸ **Capt G. W. Lyon, m.i.d.; Wellington; born Foxton, 16 Jan 1915; clerk.**

⁹ **Maj H. J. Demouth, m.i.d.; born Levin, 25 Feb 1919; warehouseman.**

¹⁰ **Capt W. A. Swarbrick; born NZ, 6 Dec 1917; clerk; died 12 May 1951.**

¹¹ **Capt D. M. Hooper; Auckland; born Auckland, 22 Aug 1915; manager.**

¹² **Capt A. B. Watt; Wellington; born NZ, 8 Aug 1904; company manager; Adjt Sup Coy 1942-43.**

¹³ **L-Cpl R. J. Myers; Christchurch; born NZ, 3 Jun 1920; assistant slaughterman.**

¹⁴ **L-Cpl C. P. Keppel; Oamaru; born Foxton, 7 Sep 1916; clerk.**

¹⁵ **Brig D. T. Maxwell, OBE, m.i.d.; Wellington; born NZ, 13 Jun 1898; Regular soldier; DAAG 2 NZEF 1940; AA and QMG 2 NZ Div Oct 1941-Jun 1942; comd British Commonwealth Sub-Area, Tokyo, 1946-47; comd Area 5, Wellington, 1947-48; NZ Joint Services Liaison Staff, Melbourne, 1948-51; comd Cent Central**

Military District 1952-53.

¹⁶ Maj R. P. Latimer, m.i.d.; Dunedin; born Dunedin, 10 Mar 1915; assistant company manager; OC 1 Amn Coy Sep 1944-Feb 1945.

¹⁷ Capt T. M. Battersby, m.i.d.; Rotorua; born Auckland, 30 Apr 1911; garage sales manager.

¹⁸ Capt A. B. Cottrell, MC; Bay of Plenty; born Rotorua, 25 Mar 1915; carrier.

¹⁹ Dvr T. McLaughlin; Westport; born NZ, 27 Jul 1912; shop assistant.

²⁰ Lt-Col G. P. Sanders, DSO, m.i.d.; Linton; born England, 2 Sep 1908; Regular soldier; CO 26 Bn Jun-Jul 1944, 27 (MG) Bn and 27 Bn (Japan) Nov 1944-46; Director of Training, Army HQ, 1949-54; GSO 1 NZ Div 1954-.

²¹ Sgt W. Braimbridge; Dunedin; born Leeds, 3 Jun 1900; mechanic and engineer.

²² Lt W. E. Baldwin; Southland; born Invercargill, 29 Sep 1916; van driver.

²³ Lt-Col A. W. Greville, m.i.d.; born NZ, 5 Aug 1897; Regular soldier; killed in action 22 Jul 1942.

²⁴ Maj R. C. Gibson; Auckland; born Auckland, 20 Feb 1909; woodwork instructor; OC 1 Amn Coy Apr-Sep 1944.

²⁵ Dvr G. N. Marshall; Outram; born Outram, 15 May 1915; porter; wounded 26 Nov 1941.

26 Lt-Col R. V. Closey, OBE, ED, m.i.d.; Papatoetoe; born Bury, England, 14 Nov 1897; builder; OC NZ Reception Depot Mar-Oct 1941; OC 1 NZ FMU, Libya, Nov 1941-Apr 1942; OC 1 NZ PW Repat Unit, Italy, 1945.

27 Cpl A. T. Chinn; Hokitika; born NZ, 4 Sep 1909; coalminer; wounded May 1941.

28 Dvr J. W. Pitt; Lower Hutt; born Wanganui, 2 Sep 1914; motor driver.

29 Dvr A. R. Amtman; born Christchurch, 29 Jul 1917; carpenter.

30 Cpl C. A. Buchan; born Otago, 17 Jan 1913; linesman; p.w. Nov 1941.

31 Sgt G. C. Trill; born USA, 29 Oct 1910; commercial traveller.

32 Dvr A. H. Sibley; born NZ, 20 Jun 1918; grocer's assistant; p.w. Nov 1941.

33 Dvr F. Ferguson; Outram; born Outram, 11 Jan 1918; market-gardener.

34 Brig G. H. Clifton, DSO and bar, MC, m.i.d.; Auckland; born Greenmeadows, 18 Sep 1898; Regular soldier; CRE 2 NZ Div 1940-41; CE 30 Corps 1941-42; comd 6 Inf Bde Feb-Sep 1942; p.w. 4 Sep 1942; escaped in Germany Mar 1945; NZ MLO, London, 1949-52; Commandant Northern Military District 1952-53.

SUPPLY COMPANY

CHAPTER 8 – FROM LIBYA TO SYRIA

CHAPTER 8

From Libya to Syria

As the main part of Supply Column was settling in at **Fuka**, **5 Brigade Company** was moving back into **Libya** in search of **5 Brigade**—and it was literally a search. Fifth Brigade was with **13 Corps** pursuing the enemy westward along the coast. Outside **Tobruk**, when the main part of the **New Zealand Division** had withdrawn, in the words of the **British Ministry of Information**, victory had begun ‘to declare itself in what seemed an hour of defeat’. Harassed by **Eighth Army**, the enemy gave ground and by 12 December was back at **Gazala**. Here he held an insecure line, with his southern flank exposed and only about fifty tanks to guard it. Against this line on 14 December **Eighth Army** launched a force that included **5 Brigade**. The centre of the enemy's line was breached, and although on the 15th the enemy launched a strong counter-attack that fell on **5 Brigade**, he was unable to recover the initiative and again turned and fled.

It was at this stage that the **Supply Column** group at last found the brigade. The group set out from **El Beida** on 10 December, going first to **Bir el Thalata**, only to find that **Rear Eighth Army** had moved from this area. No information could be obtained of the whereabouts of **5 Brigade**. Next day it was learned that the brigade was somewhere in the **El Adem** area, and the company loaded up with 13,500 rations, 9000 gallons of petrol and oil, 3600 gallons of water and a variety of ammunition.

The company went west again on 12 December to **Libyan Sheferzen**, but nothing could be learned at 51 FMC there about **5 Brigade**. Six tons of ordnance stores were loaded, and the company moved on the next day to 67 FMC, just south of **Bir el Gubi**. But 67 FMC had no knowledge of **5 Brigade** and **Roberts** was referred to **13 Corps Report Centre** at **El Adem**. Arriving at **El Adem** at noon on the 14th **Roberts** was told that there was no **New Zealand brigade** with **13 Corps**. Fortunately **Supply and Transport Rear 13 Corps** knew better. Here **Roberts** found all the information he wanted, and on the 15th took over the supplying of **5**

Brigade from a section of 4 RMT which had been acting as the brigade's second-line transport.

Settling near **Acroma** the Supply Column group immediately began operations, and in addition to the supply point previously operated by the 4 RMT section, established ammunition, petrol and water points nearby.

It was very quickly impressed on the unit that it was back in the theatre of operations. At 11 p.m. on the day it took over it received a demand for 3500 rounds of 25-pounder ammunition and 150,000 rounds of small-arms ammunition. An enemy counter-attack was expected next morning. The 1st Regiment of the Royal Horse Artillery was still under the command of **5 Brigade**, and to act as second-line transport for that unit Roberts had fifteen RASC three-tonners added to his composite company. Drawing from dumps around **Tobruk**, the trucks moved back and forward across the desert to meet continuing demands. There were not enough lorries and so the men worked day and night, but managed to find time to pause twelve miles west of **Acroma** to pick up five 25-millimetre French anti-tank guns. With wheels removed, they were secured to the ack-ack trucks with U bolts over the trails and cross members, giving them a traverse the width of the tailboard. Never had Supply Column been so well armed. How comforting these guns would have been a week or so earlier.

There was, in fact, no counter-attack on the 16th, and the New Zealanders and two Polish battalions went forward to exploit their previous successes. Demands for ammunition continued to come back to Supply Column until 18 December; then there was silence. Fifth Brigade had completed its task and dropped out of the fight.

For the next week or so the Supply Column group was engaged in moving and supplying **5 Brigade** and generally cleaning up scattered ammunition dumps—mostly containing 25-pounder ammunition—that had been left behind. The brigade moved first to **El Adem**, and here, in a raging dust-storm, spent Christmas—or several hours of it. Though

Supply Column had been known to conjure up unexpected delicacies in the most unlikely places, this was one occasion when circumstances were beyond it. Breakfast on Christmas Day was rice and bully stew, and dinner, bully stew and rice. And that, in the meantime, was that.

The trek back to **Egypt** was begun late on the afternoon of Christmas Day. Forty-six **5 Brigade** Company vehicles were used as troop-carriers for 22 and 23 Battalions.

No other move in the Second Libyan Campaign so well exemplifies the uncanny navigational skill individual drivers had attained, and the confidence officers placed in it. The **5 Brigade** that was being carried back to **Egypt** was quite different from the **5 Brigade** that had set out from **Egypt** in November. The original Brigade Headquarters was overrun at **Sidi Azeiz**, and its headquarters officers were relatively inexperienced. The result of this was shown in a movement order for a move to **Bir el Thalata** laying down column of route as the formation. Column of route for 300 vehicles over open desert!

It was quite fantastic, and it became even more so at 9 a.m. on 26 December when, as this worm-like convoy was stretched across the desert, a raging sandstorm blew up and blotted out the landscape.

Roberts took prompt action. The route, he knew, was roughly south-east to Libyan Sheferzen. His **5 Brigade** Company—less the forty-six trucks on troop-carrying work—was travelling in what the Brigade Major considered its rightful place at the rear, and as the sandstorm closed down he swung his convoy away to the south-west and, after four miles, halted. He told drivers to go to **El Beida**, cross the frontier wire and rendezvous with him there. And away they all went individually through the sandstorm.

After Roberts reached **El Beida** he drove up the Wire to Libyan Sheferzen. Few vehicles of the brigade convoy had come through the Wire, and Roberts reported to a major of **5 Brigade** Headquarters that he had not seen the convoy ahead of him. Roberts picked up the rest of his

company and moved east to a point south-west of **Sofafi** and thence along a telephone line to a point north-east of **Misheifa**, and so on to **Bir el Thalata**. Approaching Sofafi he overtook the head of the **5 Brigade** convoy—twenty vehicles. The rest of the 300 were scattered about the desert.

During the night of 26–27 December Latimer and Gibson (Ammunition Company) reported in at Thalata, and early on the morning of the 27th drivers who had been troop-carrying arrived after delivering their troops. Most had done their own navigation from **El Adem**, without compasses and without maps. By noon on the 27th the company was complete again and in operation issuing rations, petrol, and water.

And now, within sight of journey's end—and the end of a hectic campaign—this ASC group found itself abruptly turned back towards the desert. As Eighth Army chased Rommel back to the west it found itself hobbled by a supply problem which, reports an official booklet, 'was quite enough to explain the army's lack of strength on the western front and to ensure that it would be weak until at least Benghazi could be made usable.'

On the afternoon of 27 December Roberts was informed that all NZASC transport was to be taken over by G (SD) Rear Eighth Army; in the event, he did not hand over his transport, but operated on instructions from Army. On the 29th Supply Column provided vehicles to carry brigade units back to the railhead at **Misheifa** and then turned its attention to the demands of the new task. The Ammunition Company section, together with four Supply Column trucks, took aboard 1 Battalion Welsh Guards and set off for **Libya**. The remainder of the vehicles loaded 1216 Indian Labour Company and rolled off down the coast road with **El Adem** as their destination.

On the same day at **Fuka** a second Supply Column group of ninety-one men, under Morris and **Burgess**,¹ was broken out to join another composite company commanded by Captain **Coutts**,² of Ammunition Company.

Weather that at first blinded and then bogged Eighth Army aided Rommel's withdrawal in the closing days of December. In addition, the enemy received tank reinforcements and was able to regroup, thus foiling the British attempt to cut off the main body of the retiring troops. The enemy made a stand at **Agedabia**, then fell back to **El Agheila**. And here for a few weeks the line rested.

Supply Column was now back in its old role of general carrier, work in which it had shown proficiency during Wavell's campaign twelve months earlier. The task of the Ammunition Company group that included Morris's men was to run from the railhead at **Bir el Thalata** to **Tobruk**. Roberts's group was the second link, running from the **Tobruk** area to a new supply base at **Msus**. The third link was provided by 4 RMT, which was carrying forward from **Msus**.

Of the first two links, Roberts's drivers had the hardest task. **Msus** was reached by setting a westerly course from **Bir Hacheim** across a dusty, jolting track; here and there salt flats permitted good speeds, but intersecting wadis often brought trucks down to crawler gear. The 300-mile journey—150 miles each way—made heavy demands on petrol, and a platoon had to take seven three-tonners from its load-carrying strength for the sole purpose of carrying fuel for the convoy.

The first convoy out approached its task with some confidence. Track markers—long poles crowned by empty four-gallon petrol cans and placed at four or five-mile intervals—were lined westward, and the trip looked an easy one. Alas, 20 miles out next morning the convoy overtook the marker-laying party, and from then on it was the open desert again. On this trip Latimer was kept busy recovering vehicles that bogged down or suffered mechanical faults.

Despite the difficulties, Supply Column substantially trimmed down the time required for the journey. RASC units had been doing the trip in nine days; the first Supply Column convoy came home in four and a half. The surprised control post thought at first that it had been chased back by the enemy. Average time for the round trip became five days.

Petrol was the main cargo, and again the British Army flimsy proved its worthlessness. One estimate of the amount of petrol remaining to be delivered by the time the trucks reached **Msus** is one third. Perhaps Supply Column was doing the trip too fast.

Broken springs were as great a problem as ever, and when a British truck was blown up New Zealanders from Coutts's composite company went in with jacks while the vehicle was still burning and smartly removed its springs.

For three weeks this steady building-up of petrol went on; then with a suddenness that left many people wondering what was happening, Eighth Army went scurrying back towards **Gazala** and left the supplies for the Germans.

Possibly not even Rommel expected events to take this turn. On 21 January he struck back at Eighth Army in a move that a British communique unwisely called a reconnaissance in force. The thin British line buckled and broke and Rommel was on his way back to **Egypt**. On the 22nd he had reached **Saunnu** and Antelat, 40 miles south of **Msus**.

A 4 RMT convoy that was shelled on that day was, until official word came, unable to convince an incredulous superior officer at **Msus** that events had taken a fresh turn. Running west from **Bir Hacheim**, a Supply Column convoy under Latimer soon became aware that something was amiss. First four armoured cars were sighted, and then part of 4 RMT was encountered. The Supply Column men were told that the enemy had taken Antelat. When the convoy reached **Msus** a 4 RMT convoy was just setting off for **Benghazi**, and the Supply Column vehicles, after being unloaded, were attached to 239 Wing RAF, consisting mainly of Australians. When the Germans had taken Antelat they had captured all the **RAF's** petrol there, and the Air Force was anxious that the same should not happen at **Msus**; Supply Column's task was to leave at dawn next day with all the petrol it could carry, and head for **Tmimi**.

Throughout the night anti-tank tracer darted through the darkness

south of the airfield, and soon after dawn, when the Supply Column convoy had just driven clear, German bombers descended on the airfield. British fighters pounced on them, and half a dozen or more bombers came tumbling down.

The convoy headed first north to Charruba, then east to **Tmimi**. Here it waited until the aircraft came back to refuel. Then it was ordered to move on to **Gazala**, since it was not intended to hold **Tmimi**, and dump the rest of the petrol there.

Back at **Tobruk** the Column was promptly instructed to load up with ammunition and deliver it to the Poles at **Derna**. It was an uncomfortable drive, straight towards an advancing enemy. Bombers harassed the convoy at one stage and beyond the **Tmimi** turn-off there was no other transport on the road. At **Derna** engineers were tunnelling into a cliff on the roadside preparatory to blocking the highway.

The ammunition was issued, a few trucks bombed, without casualty, and the convoy returned to **Tobruk**. Here it was learned that New Zealand transport was to go back to **Bir el Thalata** to await **5 Brigade**.

Though met with counter-attacks, the enemy pushed on, and while the New Zealand trucks were rolling back to **Egypt** for **5 Brigade** the line moved back to **Gazala**. Here there were signs of another thrust, but nothing came of it, and by 15 February it was all over. Each side settled down while it gathered fresh strength.

Fifth Brigade came back to the desert in mid-February and took up a position at **El Adem**. Its role was to protect Eighth Army's lines of communication from any attack from the south and to shield **13 Corps** FMC and the **El Adem** landing ground.

A **5 Brigade** ASC Company had again been formed under the command of Roberts. It was now a waiting war, a war of set positions and constant routine, a war in which there was time to take notice of the discomforts of the desert winter. In these circumstances a man clings to his comforts, and when the air-raid warning gun at brigade

barked its message early on the morning of 28 February no one took much notice. The Luftwaffe's whole interest around **Tobruk** seemed to be on the waterfront, and Supply Column was a good 15 miles away. But on this morning the enemy was interested in **El Adem** aerodrome, from which Kittyhawks operated. As it happened there were no Kittyhawks there at this moment, and the disappointed Messerschmitts prowled around for something else to 'do over'. They found, among other things, Supply Column, and came swooping down. On the ground there was a scatter as men came tumbling out of bed in various stages of undress and dived for slit trenches. The result of the raid: one minor casualty, no damage to trucks or dumps.

Four days later more trouble came from the sky—rain. It came pouring down during the night and by the morning on 4 March the desert was awash and transport hopelessly bogged. 'It was the sort of downpour that in New Zealand produces pictures in the illustrated weeklies of boats being rowed down the township's main street.' Movement was impossible for three days.

But there were compensations to be found, even in a wilderness in the middle of a war. The ubiquitous **Naafi** had set up shop in **Tobruk** and could supply limitless quantities of cigarettes and beer. It could also supply whisky, provided the order was signed by an officer, and the New Zealanders had no trouble in persuading Captain Cook and Captain Abel Tasman to sign unlimited numbers of chits. Unfortunately the **Naafi** manager at last felt constrained to complain to **5 Brigade** Headquarters that Captain Sydney Bridge, of 29 Battalion, had exceeded all reasonable bounds by buying 15 cases in one day. The complaint had the desired effect.

The shortage of springs was as great a problem as ever, and at one stage the company was almost at a standstill. Sergeant Johnson and Driver **Baxter**³ went out on a salvaging expedition—thereby earning the displeasure of a salvage unit—and with pickings from the wrecks of the **Sidi Rezegh** battlefield kept the company a wheel.

Fifth Brigade remained in the desert until March. When it moved back to [Maadi](#) the Supply Column detachment went too, providing in addition to the supply organisation a refuelling system for the vehicles. This section of the vehicles reached [Maadi](#) on 27 March, and the remainder, carrying some of the infantry, next day.

The first consideration was seven days' leave, and the second Christmas dinner. The latter was held in the National Hotel, [Cairo](#), on 5 April. Two days later the Column headed north for [Syria](#).

This move produced a certain amount of entertainment. Along with the convoy went the newly created NZ Mobile Laundry, which had among its equipment big trailers. There was some concern at [Maadi](#) lest these should be damaged on tow, and the movement order allowed the convoy a speed of 15 miles an hour. The convoy reached its second day's destination at noon and it was decided to ignore the speeds laid down. So instead of leaving each morning at 7 a.m., it left at 10 a.m. and presently found British MPs patrolling the road in a state of agitation because the convoy was late. And on arrival at the next staging area more MPs would be in an uproar because the convoy had arrived before they had gone out to guide it in.

There was a certain amount of joking going on over the laundry unit—though the OC, Captain Gillanders [Scott](#),⁴ didn't appreciate it—and when approaching the divisional area someone hoisted a flag on the leading truck of Latimer's section purporting to be the standard of the unit—a pair of underpants, soaked in petrol and rubbed with mud from [Damascus](#).

Among the waifs and strays of the Libyan campaign was a small composite group of six trucks—two each from Supply Column, [Petrol Company](#) and Ammunition Company—which were assigned to serve Divisional Cavalry. For about three days in the early part of the campaign this group carried out its duties, but called away while its supply transport was absent, Divisional Cavalry moved off without being able to advise the ASC men where it was going.

Finding their step-parent gone, the ASC group at last joined up with an English unit on the Egyptian side of the Wire. No one, of course, had any idea where the divisional administration group might be, but after four or five days the men decided to strike out into **Libya** and trust their luck. They did not go far. They came on to 50 FMC some time after the Germans had overrun it, but as they moved towards it they knew nothing of what had happened. A **Petrol Company** truck, driven by **Cunningham**,⁵ was leading, with a Supply Column vehicle about fifty yards behind. As the leading vehicle came opposite a postal tent it halted, and the **Petrol Company** men were seen to get out. Then they turned abruptly and seized their rifles, and out of the tent came two Germans—an officer and his batman. One of the men advanced towards the New Zealanders, and Cunningham's rifle stopped him short with a bullet through the foot.

In the distance a small convoy that looked Italian was seen approaching at speed. The two prisoners were bundled aboard a truck and the ASC vehicles turned about and fled. The prisoners were dropped off at a prisoner-of-war cage, and the trucks returned to the English unit.

That night a disturbance woke the New Zealanders, and they heard three South African officers shouting that the Germans were coming. The New Zealanders remained where they were, and nothing happened.

When their units returned the men rejoined them.

When Supply Column came out of **Libya** in December 1941 it was a veteran unit—veteran in experience, in knowledge, in wisdom. It had accomplished with merit its first real test in the field; it had learned the ways of the desert and it had acquired a mature judgment. It was self-reliant.

Whatever else may be said about **CRUSADER**, it was undoubtedly the proving ground of the New Zealand Division for the desert battles to come, and the ASC no less than the fighting units drew strength and

confidence from the experience. The ASC, which had few casualties and required few uninitiated reinforcements, benefited greatly.

Many things were learned.

Drivers learned how to read the desert, to tell from the colour of the scrub how far inland they were, to navigate with nothing more than a watch and the sun. They learned to pick the desert to save springs, to recognise features to guide themselves. Officers could with confidence line up a truck and say to the driver, 'Such and such a battalion is out in that direction somewhere. Find it, deliver the rations, then find us. We probably won't be here by the time you're back.' And with the uncanny instinct of a homing pigeon, truck and driver would come back.

Officers learned the necessity of correct dispersal and the art of movement in desert formation. They learned to navigate with competence by sun compass or magnetic compass, and to read map and ground on the move; to circumnavigate features and yet not lose the general line; not to follow tracks and telegraph posts. And it was shown that NCOs should be capable of handling map and compass as well.

Officers learned how to establish and close water and supply points quickly to avoid attention from the air, and how to handle a dispersed group. They learned very quickly that in securing many necessities it was quicker and surer to help yourself rather than fight through a tangle of red tape; it was imperative to do so, for in no other way could the unit have been kept mobile and in operation. Thanks to 'klefity' tactics and the untiring work of the Workshops Section, which had no material on hand, the Column was kept on the active list. Not only derelict vehicles of other units, but vehicles found abandoned in soft sand were converted; by a process known as 'cannibalising' spare parts were obtained. All broken-down Column trucks were salvaged, if necessary rebuilt. In consequence all vehicles, apart from those captured, were brought out.

Both officers and men learned how to move the unit off smartly. In earlier days it often required twenty minutes to transfer from dispersal area to the road, and in the inevitable concertina that developed rear trucks would be doing fifty miles an hour. Now they could shift promptly and efficiently, saving time by leaving the cooks' trucks to pack and follow in their own time. Thus, early abroad, Supply Column men could look with patronising disdain as they drove past other units still breakfasting and preparing.

Many needs were shown; some were remedied, others were not. In **CRUSADER**, supply details—the men responsible for the 'shop work' of issuing—had no transport of their own; they and their belongings would be dumped in the desert and left to their own devices until the next move. In **Syria**, after the unit had been reorganised and supply platoons formed, these men received their own transport and office truck and cooks' wagon, and could move as a self-contained detachment.

Better communication was another need, and also better protection. Better protection was supplied, in effect, when Eighth Army gained air superiority and when, in subsequent campaigns, the battle line was more orderly than it had been in **CRUSADER**. But it was shown that if ever another campaign as fluid as **CRUSADER** were contemplated, roving convoys needed something better than Bren carriers as escorts.

Rolling thunder, driving rain, tearing winds and dust were the assortment of weather that swept over **Fuka** and **Baggush** as the main part of the Division settled in during the last half of December 1941. Caught up by the wind, a swirling cloud of sand would dim the daylight and by night blot out every vestige of starlight. Then rain would pour down, saturating the desert and flooding many underground abodes. And as the clouds dispersed the wind would stir up the dust again. There was some sunshine, and one or two men plunged into the now bitingly cold **Mediterranean**, but the sky was predominantly grey.

The New Year arrived with a shower of pyrotechnics and tracer. Celebrations began around 8 p.m. on 31 December with a few isolated

explosions and odd Very lights, and as the evening progressed Bofors belched out long, red arcs towards the sea, machine guns sent up darting tracer, small arms cracked, Very lights blossomed, and every so often a heavy explosion thumped through the night. As the Division's area took on the aspect of a fully fledged battle, nearby naval and air force units phoned to inquire whether they could be of any assistance in repelling 'the landing'.

During January the Division moved back to the Delta and Canal areas. Fifth Brigade began its move from **Baggush** to **Kabrit**, on the Canal, on 4 January; **4 Brigade** went to **Maadi**. In the meantime, **6 Brigade** stayed and trained in the desert. On the Canal **5 Brigade** carried out combined training exercises. When it completed these later in January, **4 Brigade** moved down to the Canal Zone from **Maadi**, and **6 Brigade** came in from the desert to **Maadi**. Early in February **5 Brigade** moved back to the desert, and later in the month **6 Brigade** went to the Canal for its combined training.

It was proposed at one stage that the New Zealand Division should return to the desert, with **5 Brigade** making a landing behind the enemy lines, but Rommel's advance to **Gazala** altered the complexion of things, and the scheme was washed out.

Supply Column moved by road from **Fuka** to **Fayid**, in the Canal Zone; it left **Fuka** on 7 January and after an overnight stay at **Wadi Natrun** reached **Fayid** on 9 January. In the dirty, dusty Canal Zone the unit settled down to a life of routine and training, relieved by inter-platoon and inter-company football and cricket. A recreation hut was formed by joining together two EIPs; it was flattened during a dust-storm that razed most of the camp, and was re-erected. A unit library was also formed.

There was at least one brief flash of excitement at **Fayid**. The store and workshops trucks were parked parallel to each other, with a canopy slung between them. Fire broke out in the store truck, flared up through the canopy and reached across the canopy linking the two vehicles. The

flames were also dangerously near an EPIP tent. When Driver **Crosbie** ⁶ arrived on the scene, attempts were being made to tow the vehicles apart. In spite of the flames licking around both sides of the cab, **Crosbie** jumped into the workshops truck and drove it clear, allowing ready access to fire-fighting equipment on the workshops vehicles and permitting men to attack the fire. When the vehicles were side by side the heat had been too intense to get at the burning sides. His action, which saved both trucks and valuable transport stores, later earned him a 'meritorious mention' in routine orders throughout the Division.

On 16 February Supply Column became 1 New Zealand Divisional Supply Company. Part of a general NZASC reorganisation that brought the New Zealand Division into line with the new British Army establishment, the new company had, instead of echelons, seven platoons: Company Headquarters, three transport, two supply, one workshops. Each of the ASC companies, organised in this manner, could operate more efficiently and with more flexibility; if a quick switch to troop-carrying became necessary, one platoon could carry a battalion, four platoons a brigade.

On 28 February **Morris**, **Burgess**, and eighty-one other ranks returned from the desert.

In the closing days of February and the beginning of March 4 and 6 Brigades moved north by rail and road to **Syria**. **Syria**, only recently wrested from the Vichy French, was a possible line of attack—as it had so often been for armies in the past—by German forces thrusting down through **Turkey**. It was the British intention to prepare for an offensive in **Libya** while protecting the northern flank with delaying forces in **Syria**. The New Zealand Division, as it passed under command of Ninth Army, became part of these delaying forces.

Shortage of transport made it necessary for most units to travel by rail and civilian buses, but Supply Company, still on wheels, set out by road on 14 March. Crossing the Canal by pontoon bridge north of **Ismailia**, the convoy threaded along the black ribbon of bitumen that led

north across the **Sinai Desert**. The first overnight stop was at Abu Aweigla, a desolate spot on the **Sinai** road identified as a staging area by countless empty and battered flimsies that were strewn around the desert.

Driving north in the cool, spring air next morning, the men had their first glimpse of the 'green pastures' to come; scattered flowers, struggling grass and corn appeared in the sandy waste. Gradually the desert gave way to a landscape of vivid green splashed with the flagrant colours of wild flowers, and herds of goats and sheep moved across the pastures. Staging that night at Qastina, the company travelled on next day through sun-soaked citrus orchards to Ez Zib, a coastal village near the Syrian border.



Eastern Mediterranean
Eastern Mediterranean

After crossing the border on the 17th the convoy halted for lunch beneath the pines on the outskirts of **Beirut**; then, tracing a tortuous route through the town, it began the long grind into the cool, clear atmosphere above the snow-line of the **Beirut** hill. Beyond the summit the road twisted down into the **Bekaa Valley**, which lay between the **Lebanon** and Anti- **Lebanon** ranges; it skirted the **Rayak** airfield, passed through historic **Baalbek** and went north up the valley. Nineteen miles beyond **Baalbek** the convoy halted near Rasm el Hadi.

On rough, rocky ground so hard that the sappers had to be called in to drill holes for the tent pegs, the company set up camp. Once again the company was settled in picturesque surroundings—not as colourful as its camps in **Greece**, perhaps, but the **Lebanon** landscape, presenting the saw-toothed, snow-capped range across the valley, had a rugged beauty of its own. Behind the camp area rose the Anti-Lebanons; on the southern boundary ran a cold mountain stream.

The New Zealand Division was now far from the war; the nearest enemy forces were 500 miles away on the **Mediterranean** and Aegean islands. The most likely German attack was from the north through the **Caucasus**.

Running north and south—parallel with the coast—the **Lebanon** mountain ranges did not offer an obstacle to attack, and to meet invasion a series of five fortresses was planned on the high ground of the ranges covering the coastal area, the **Bekaa Valley** and the desert approaches to the east. Each fortress was to hold sufficient troops to make sorties against the enemy if he attempted an outflanking movement through the desert.

The fortress taken over by the New Zealanders covered the northern entrance to the **Bekaa Valley** between the two ranges; centred on the village of **Djedeide**, it took its name from it. When **4 Brigade** took over in March, a broad, deep tank trap, skirted with obstacles and studded with pillboxes, was being carved across the valley floor. In the mountains on either side rambled a maze of wiring systems and trenches, and later steep, winding roads from the rear were built. It was designed to accommodate four infantry brigades and a tank battalion.

In case the fortress should be bypassed, administration instructions were designed to make it self-sufficient for at least sixty days; five days' supplies of all commodities were to be held in each company area, and five days' reserve by each brigade; the remaining fifty days' reserve would be under divisional control.

On its arrival **4 Brigade** took over part of the construction work. **Sixth Brigade**, meanwhile, had gone north to man the frontier positions, where demolitions were being prepared to delay any invading forces. **Divisional Headquarters** was at **Baalbek**.

Supply Company was employed carrying rations for 14 British DID and supplies from **Beirut** and **Damascus** to 101 NZ DID. From Beirut—a 24-hour turn-around—came fresh meat; from **Damascus**, fresh vegetables; and from **Zahle**, ice. In addition there were general transport duties. Loads included fodder for mules, gravel, cement, and reinforcing steel for pillboxes, and bombs and building materials for the **RAF**. Another load was charcoal, and drivers taking their trucks into the mountains for this commodity had to watch their arms, equipment, and tools closely as the tribesmen were pilferers of above-average ability.

Supply Company itself, for that matter, was reasonably competent in the art of acquiring whatever could not otherwise be obtained. From somewhere a large marquee appeared and by a communal effort was hoisted in the company area; it crashed to earth twice before it was successfully erected. Tables and chairs were knocked up, and the marquee, which with tables removed had a seating capacity of 200, became the centre of the unit's social life. There was tea and biscuits every evening, and periodically debates, talks, discussions, quizzes, brains trusts, concerts, card evenings, chess, draughts, competitions, darts and so on. The prime organiser was Padre **Holland**.⁷ Visitors from other ASC companies were frequent.

One memorable evening the Mukta or mayor of **Baalbek**, clad in flowing robes and equipped with 'hubbly-bubbly' and dagger, brought twenty-four children from the town to give a concert of songs, sketches, and recitations. Two priests from a nearby monastery completed the party. The audience understood not a word, but voted the concert a huge success. It was recorded that 'conscious humour greatly appreciated, unconscious humour more so'.

There was serious work to be done as well, however. Although it was

not a fighting unit, the company's men were soldiers and were expected to know something about soldiering. Training, which was carried out without interfering with transport duties, included the hand grenade. There was a marked difference between the studied striving for perfection with dummy throws and the hasty heaving away in live throws. During the live throws there was a total of twenty-five blinds, all of which had to be attended to by the instructing sergeant.

On 3 May an ASC parade was held at **Baalbek** and the GOC presented awards to six men, three of them, Captain Rawle (MC), Lieutenant Cottrell (MC) and Sergeant **Gibbs** (MM), from Supply Company. Because of their duties, 982 men of the ASC were unable to attend.

Addressing the parade, **General Freyberg** remarked that this was the first time he had inspected the entire ASC.

I want to tell you how impressed I was by the parade (he said). The turn-out, marching and arms drill were of a very high order, and the general smartness on the parade ground reflects great credit on all concerned, especially as I know the difficulties under which you all work, being split up with motor transport all over the country, and rarely coming together for a large parade. I was particularly impressed by the appearance of the men. I can say with great sincerity that the demeanour and rugged appearance of the men impressed me tremendously.

I also want to say that the record of the NZASC stands very high with the rest of the Division. We all know what we owe to the Reserve MT and ASC companies, and their great devotion during the campaigns in which the Division has played a part. I want to congratulate you and your officers for bringing this force to the high standard of efficiency which has been reached.

Biting winds, rain, and snow chilled the **Bekaa Valley** and mountain positions in the early days, and the ASC camp at Rasm el Hadi was flooded out. The wintry weather gave way to spring, and as spring

ripened into the full blaze of summer, toiling New Zealanders, stripped to the waist and tanned to a mahogany hue, slowly developed the fortress. In April **5 Brigade** relieved **6 Brigade** at the frontier positions and **6 Brigade** came down to join **4 Brigade** in the fortress, taking up its position on the left-hand defences in the foothills of the Lebanons.

Throughout all this small wars were being waged in various directions: against the native 'klefty wallahs' who would lift goods even from moving trucks, against fifth columnists and parachutists, against hashish traffic, and against boredom.

The company suffered one fatality during this period. On 4 May a captured German vehicle carting ice from **Zahle** ran off the road and crashed into a rock. Three men were admitted to hospital. Driver **Legg**,⁸ who was a passenger, died the next day. He was buried that day with military honours in a temporary military cemetery at **Ras Baalbek** in the grounds of Le Monastère de Notre Dame de l'Assomption. Priests and villagers joined in the procession, children with special vestments and carrying banners and wreaths making a colourful spectacle.

Late in May and early in June **4** and **6 Brigades** carried out exercises in the baking, dusty desert around **Forqloss**. The long days of manœuvring concluded with a full-dress attack under artillery and mortar barrages. Supply Company trucks were among the ASC vehicles servicing the brigades in the field.

News from **Libya** was disquieting. On 26 May Rommel had attacked again, and as the weeks went by the New Zealanders in **Syria** watched the panzers regain the hard-won ground of the previous year.

On 14 June the Division received orders to return to the desert, and out to the units went coded 'Prepare to move...' messages. When the trucks rolled south there were many wondering whether they were desert-bound—or homeward-bound—for New Zealand itself seemed in peril from the Japanese.

¹ **Cpl S. C. Burgess; Nelson; born Christchurch, 6 Jun 1916; carpenter.**

² **Maj P. E. Coutts, MBE, ED, m.i.d.; Auckland; born Auckland, 4 Dec 1903; salesman; OC 1 Amn Coy Oct 1941-Jan 1943 and Feb-Oct 1945; OC 18 Tk Tpnr Coy Jan 1943-Mar 1944.**

³ **Dvr J. V. Baxter; Rangiora; born Rangiora, 14 Oct 1919; baker.**

⁴ **Maj K. G. Scott, m.i.d.; Gisborne; born NZ, 26 Oct 1915; law clerk; DADOS 2 NZEF 1943-44.**

⁵ **Dvr J. J. Cunningham; born England, 2 Sep 1912; slaughterman and cook.**

⁶ **Sgt I. K. Crosbie; Dunedin; born NZ, 29 Jul 1916; agricultural contractor.**

⁷ **Rev J. T. Holland; Hamilton; born Newcastle-on-Tyne, 31 Jan 1912; Church of England minister; Bishop of Waikato.**

⁸ **Dvr J. H. S. Legg; born NZ, 26 Sep 1918; business manager; died of accidental injuries 5 May 1942.**

SUPPLY COMPANY

CHAPTER 9 – RECALL TO THE DESERT

CHAPTER 9

Recall to the Desert

WHEN Rommel began his eastward drive on 26 May his plan was to seize Tobruk in three days and punch straight through to the Egyptian frontier. His timing plan broke down, but he achieved his purpose.

He attacked with two forces: one, substantially Italian, made a feint frontal attack on the Gazala line; the second, a German and Italian mobile column, bypassed Bir Hacheim and drove in from the south-west. While the Italians probed at Bir Hacheim, the enemy tanks joined battle with the British armour near Knightsbridge, and the celebrated 'Cauldron' battle developed. British counter-attacks failed, but with the Italians unable to dispose of Bir Hacheim, the enemy's supply position was critical.

At last, however, the hard-pressed French were ordered to leave Bir Hacheim, and Eighth Army, after suffering heavy losses, gave ground. Rommel turned on Tobruk and quickly secured it on 20 June.

The New Zealanders were now on their way south from Syria. While these events had been taking place, the Division had been contemplating meeting an attack from another direction; the Germans were making a drive in Russia, too, and their objective was reported to be the Persian oilfields. General Freyberg had made a reconnaissance in Persia as a preliminary to the possible use of the Division in the defence scheme.

The recall order reached the Division on 14 June, and through the signal lines went the movement orders to the scattered units. An administration group order issued on 16 June gave information of a divisional move on the 18th.

Movement south began on 16 June with supposed secrecy. Units left their signposts standing, painted out their fernleaf emblems on vehicles and removed badges and flashes, but the civilians were not deceived.

More than one unit received a farewell delegation and was wished good shooting.

Down the bitumen military road that traced a winding course through **Syria**, Palestine, and the **Sinai Desert** streamed columns of yellow trucks. As they skirted the Sea of Galilee, heat beat down from an open sky and struck up from the road with the intensity of a blast furnace. Metal on vehicles became too hot to touch; overheated engines died as the trucks dragged their way out of the valley of Galilee and a string of trucks making progress in fits and starts littered the roadside.

Supply Company, with Quirk as convoy commander, started the journey on 18 June; Nos. 1 and 2 Platoons had been detached, 1 Platoon for transport duties with **18 Battalion** and 2 Platoon for supply duties with a New Zealand artillery group. In the scorching heat of the second day's march—through the **Jordan Valley**—a despatch rider, Lance-Corporal **Halliday**,¹ fell from his motor cycle and received fatal injuries. They were long, gruelling days for drivers, with never enough time for rest, and the man behind the wheel could be seen slapping himself to keep awake, while the spare driver would be sound asleep, perhaps with his head banging against the steel door of the truck.

The convoy rolled down through the picture postcard **Sinai Desert** on 21 June, and in mid-afternoon the tapering pinnacles of the **Ismailia** memorial came into view. At **Ismailia** it was learned that five days' hard rations were to be loaded; it was now clear that the **Western Desert** was the destination. Clearing **Ismailia** at daybreak—5 a.m.—the convoy crossed the Canal and some hours later was streaming nose-to-tail through **Cairo**, where the urchins were shouting 'Saieda, Kiwi,' and the newspaper vendors were doing a brisk business with months-old newspapers. Buying as their trucks were on the move, the men could do little about it, but the man who bought a paper with an empty cigarette carton at least held his own. Beyond **Cairo** the convoy ran north along the **Alexandria** road, with the desert, a glaring yellow, on either side.

At **Amiriya** reserve water—two gallons a man—was drawn and

vehicles refuelled. No. 4 Platoon drew and filled 10,000 water containers and thereafter became the water platoon, and in the hard desert fighting to come was to play an important role.

The next morning—23 June—the convoy turned past the signboard that said simply, ‘**Western Desert**’, and began the run westwards. It ran headlong into an army in retreat. East and west along the black ribbon of road the New Zealand vehicles stretched into the shimmering haze, wheels sucking at the melting tar, engines roaring in the heat. On the other side of the road and in the choking, dusty desert on either side flowed a clattering horde of transport: rattling, clanking flats carrying smashed tanks; scammels with battle salvage—twisted metal, wheels, pieces of guns; **RAF** road transporters with planes and sections of planes; ambulances, their bold red crosses on white circles standing out in the forlorn, battered procession; an occasional impatiently jostling staff car; and battle-scarred trucks, from which bearded, red-eyed drivers stared vacantly at the tail of the vehicle ahead. It was as though the whole Eighth Army was routed and on the run.

It was a sobering, depressing sight. There was no end to them; each wreck was a mark of defeat, and each listless man the personification of fatigue and failure. Here and there a new tank, a new Bren carrier or a new armoured car suggested that not only the defeated but the undefeated, too, were in flight.

‘We began to wonder,’ Quirk wrote in his diary, ‘whether we would meet Germans.’

But **Mersa Matruh**, reached at 7 p.m., presented a different aspect. Here New Zealanders were going about their tasks and finding time for a swim, and there was an atmosphere of quiet confidence. The company went to its allotted area at Smugglers' Cove, and 5 Platoon, which took over 4 Platoon's supply work, immediately drew in bulk from 14 BSD and issued 14,313 rations to the Division. No. 5 Platoon camped on the supply point in **Matruh**.

The company had covered 1000 miles in five days with very little mechanical trouble.

The enemy crossed the Egyptian frontier on 24 June. Eighth Army prepared to meet him at **Mersa Matruh, and 4 and 5 NZ Brigades, the first two brigades of the Division to reach **Egypt**, took up positions in the **Matruh** defences. Then the Division's role was changed, and it was ordered to hand over to **10 Indian Division** and move south in a mobile role. Abruptly there was another change. On the evening of 25 June General Auchinleck took over direct field command from General Ritchie, and deciding that he had too few troops to shield **Matruh**'s open flank, reversed the decision to stand here and ordered a withdrawal to the Alamein Line. The New Zealand Division was now ordered to the **Minqar Qaim** area, where it was to deny the escarpment to the enemy and to command with fire the approaches from the west. Its role was to fight a delaying action.**

The two brigades moved on 26 June. They had received from Supply Company sufficient rations and water to last for three days, petrol and oil from **Petrol Company for 200 miles, and first-line ammunition from Ammunition Company. Air activity on this day indicated that the enemy was close.**

During the three days 24, 25 and 26 June Supply Company waited and worked with the rest of the administration group at Smugglers' Cove. On the first night and morning—24 June—bombers and dive-bombers made a few raids on **Matruh—‘Particularly cheeky one at 5.30 who dropped one close by on the Egyptian Barracks.’**

After the long trek from **Syria, drivers checked over vehicles, No. 1 Platoon, less thirteen trucks, remaining with **4 Field Regiment**. No. 2 Platoon rejoined the unit, and 4 Platoon returned with its water cans. A platoon less fifteen trucks of 6 RMT, commanded by Captain Smith,² marched in for water duties. No. 5 Platoon drew in bulk from 14 BSD and with air-raid alarms sounding continually issued 13,416 rations to units.**

Lieutenant Lyon took a convoy to a convalescent depot west of **Matruh**. The only group going west against the still strongly flowing tide of transport, the company men were constantly told, 'Heh, you're going the wrong way, mate.' After collecting wounded from the depot, Lyon was returning to **Matruh** when he encountered an English red-cap diverting all traffic to the south track. Lyon objected that he had 'sick jokers' in the back.

'All right, sir,' said the military policeman, 'the New Zealanders are in **Matruh**. You can go in.'

'I didn't say anything about New Zealanders,' said Lyon.

'Sir,' the MP replied, 'there are only two nationalities that have jokers, and the Australians are in **Syria**.'

On the 25th, as the Division prepared to move out into the desert, 5 Platoon again drew in bulk from 14 BSD, and with an eye cocked on the sky made an 'impromptu' issue of 20,048 rations, completing the units' three days' reserves. Over the three days 23, 24 and 25 June the platoon had issued 27,777 rations.

For its own use the company drew five 50-cwt trucks, two water carts and two 15-cwts, and in addition some 50-cwts for 4 and 5 **Field Ambulance** units. A **Petrol Company** detachment under Captain Latimer came under command.

Fifteen three-tonners and twenty-eight men were detached from the company for general duties with 4 **Field Regiment**. Burgess, who took them over, was told that the trucks only, without an officer, were required, and he returned to the unit. Then it was decided that only eleven vehicles were wanted, and the remainder were on their way back to the company when a despatch rider overtook them with the information that they were wanted by 5 **Field Regiment**. Company Headquarters was not informed of this change, and the four trucks and men so diverted were later posted as missing.

The Division's fighting units left **Matruh** for the south during the day.

At 12.30 p.m. two planes roared over and put a stick of bombs apiece across the **Petrol Company** depot adjoining the supply point, killing twelve men and burying others in a dugout. As the fire took hold, heavy black smoke rolled across the area.

The 26th June was a day of tension. There were signs of impending evacuation—many people were, in fact, disappearing—and no orders were forthcoming from Rear Division. In the morning Quirk shifted his supply point to near the water point on the **Matruh** waterfront. Issues were made to units still at Smugglers' Cove, and in the afternoon 4 Platoon (water) and 5 Platoon (supplies) went out to the **Minqar Qaim** positions and issued 15,570 rations near the telegraph line. The runner was late and held up the issue, and it was 10 p.m. before the platoons returned to the company area.

The tension was growing. Earlier in the day Quirk had seen officers at Fortress Headquarters burning papers, and when he and **Nelson**³ went down to the Lido for a swim at 7 p.m. they found the beach deserted. The town, too, was deserted, and at the water point they found that all the English troops had left, and a sole New Zealand sapper was in charge. There was an uneasy atmosphere everywhere, to which a nearby Bofors crew contributed with the information that they were in an anti-tank role, protecting the road running past the camp.

To cap it all, the **Naafi**, at which a few hours earlier Corporal Reynolds⁴ had spent £40 of the unit's canteen funds, was thrown wide open, and Supply Company trucks came back loaded to the canopies, two down on their springs under the weight of crates of tinned beer. The haul included a complete set of cricket gear, which was to be useful later.

There was a nice balance of arguments for staying and going. To stay might court capture; to go might be desertion of duty. Quirk sent a

despatch rider to **Pryde** with the information he had gleaned during the day, and suggested that as a precaution 5 Platoon should be withdrawn from **Matruh** to join the company at Smugglers' Cove.

When most of the men had turned in for the night, **Pryde** still found the requirements of duty too strong to take his unit out. 'In the absence of orders from Comd NZASC, could not at that time justify withdrawal of the company to the east,' the war diary records. A **Divisional Signals** detachment was unable to contact either Main or Rear Divisional Headquarters.



Crossing the Sinai Desert on the way to Syria
Crossing the **Sinai Desert** on the way to **Syria**



Supply Company butchery
at Aleppo

Supply Company butchery at Aleppo



In the Lebanons
In the Lebanons



Ancient caves at the source of the Orontes in
the Bekaa Valley, Syria

Ancient caves at the source of the Orontes in the Bekaa Valley, Syria



A crashed Stuka in the Alamein Line, August 1942

A crashed Stuka in the Alamein Line, August 1942

Flood in the desert south of Fuka



Flood in the desert south of Fuka



On the 'left hook', El Agheila
On the 'left hook', El Agheila



NZASC marching past Mr Churchill at Castel Benito, near Tripoli
NZASC marching past Mr Churchill at Castel Benito, near Tripoli

Rawle, meanwhile, had gone out with 4 Platoon to pick up empty water cans from a dump on the telephone line at **Garawla**. Flares to the west looked uncomfortably close. He returned to the unit in the early hours of 27 June to find a conference in progress. **Pryde**, at 2.30 a.m., had recalled 5 Platoon from its position in **Matruh**, and when leaving the town Quirk saw no guards or even any soldiers. At 4 a.m. **Pryde** called a conference of officers, and it was to this that Rawle brought news of the flares. The radio truck was still unable to raise Rear Division, and in view of the apparent nearness of the enemy, it was decided that it was advisable to move. But still another problem faced **Pryde**: although it was clear that rear units were leaving **Matruh**, it was not known whether the final stand was to be here or not, and there was some debate on whether the company should draw from 14 BSD or whether these rations would be required for the forces in the area. **Pryde** decided to load up all available trucks, an important decision that was to save the supply situation during the confused period when the Division came scurrying back to the Alamein Line.

Everyone went off for an hour's sleep. During the morning the company loaded up with two days' rations—26,200— and 30,000 gallons of petrol and filled all available water containers. At 14 BSD Indian sappers were preparing to destroy the dump, but with inflexible regard for orders the issuers would not substitute canned fruit for dried fruit. The fact that it would be blown up in an hour or so didn't matter.

Still no word had come from Rear Division. Throughout the previous night heavy gunfire had been heard, and this appeared to be drawing constantly closer. The Division was, in fact, now engaging the enemy.

At 10 a.m. it was reported that Lance-Sergeant **Hardaker**,⁵ of **Petrol Company**, had been killed in a road accident nearby, and a burial party consisting of Padre Holland, Morris, **Barnett**,⁶ and three others from Supply Company drove into the British military cemetery near **Matruh**. There was not a sign of life in the town, and clouds of smoke billowed from demolitions. The only sound was distant gunfire.

In the meantime **Pryde** had despatched Burgess to find Brigadier Crump. He went looking for him in the **Minqar Qaim** locality, found him about midday and told him **Pryde** had received no messages concerning a move, and that in view of enemy movements **Pryde** considered the company should go. Crump told Burgess that the company was to be ready to move immediately, but that it was to await a signal.

While Burgess was away, a new worry developed at Smugglers' Cove. An English officer came back to the cove with a report that he had been fired on at **Qasaba** and that the road was cut. Latimer was sent out to check the report. He returned with the information that the road was open, although the enemy was only seven miles from the road and was being lightly opposed by a Hussars regiment. An immediate decision was made to move.

A report that the road was cut also reached Brigadier Crump at Rear Division. He was unable to obtain the co-operation of Corps to clear it, nor was he able to obtain confirmation that there was a block. He thereupon radioed NZASC companies to come out.

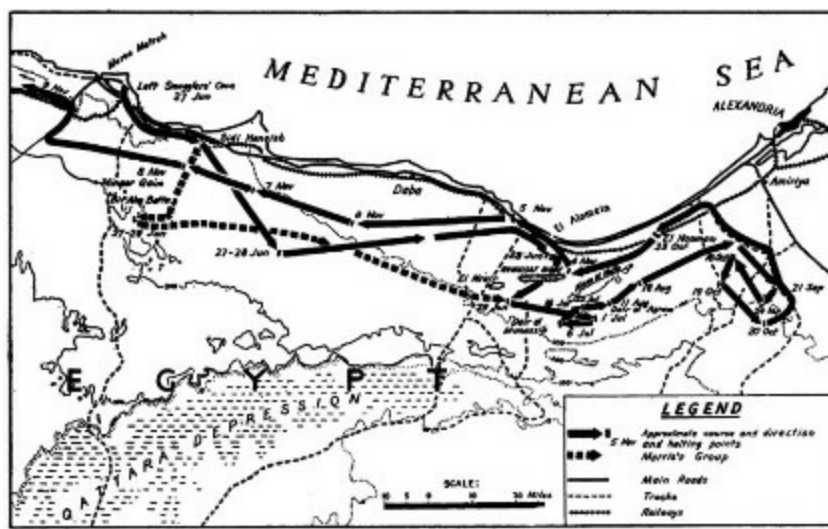
This radio-telephony message reached Supply Company after the decision to get out was made and while it was drawing supplies and water in preparation for its move, which took until 1 p.m. The company's ciphers, however, were not to be found, and it was not known until later that this was the movement order; its instruction was for the company to move to the **Fuka** area, vehicles carrying the following day's replenishment to rendezvous with the senior supply officer, Major **Bracegirdle**,⁷ at the railway crossing at **Sidi Haneish**.

Clearing Smugglers' Cove at 2 p.m., Supply Company moved east past where anti-tank guns were sited by the road. With near-perfect convoy discipline, every vehicle keeping its 100 yards' distance, the convoy moved east towards **Sidi Haneish**. Overhead there was the drone of aircraft, but not until the company was near **Sidi Haneish** did an enemy plane attempt to molest the convoy. It was driven off by British fighters.

At **Sidi Haneish** siding vehicles were dispersed while the evening meal was prepared. Afterwards all vehicles carrying supplies, petrol, and water were left under **Bracegirdle's** supervision, and the rest of the company and attachments moved to a point 20 miles south of **Fuka**, reached at 10.30 p.m.

The detached group, under **Morris**, together with a **Petrol Company** detachment under Captain **Jones**,⁸ set off from **Sidi Haneish** at 6.30 p.m. on a bearing of 210 degrees. Ahead there was bombing, and behind aerial cannon fire could be heard hammering over the road. Wrecked aircraft seemed to be everywhere, and as the convoy moved southwest across the open desert a Hurricane plunged down close by, shot down by a Messerschmitt. After 16 miles' travel the company reached Rear Division at 10 p.m. Here it was ordered to link up with a **Petrol Company** detachment under Second-Lieutenant **Burkett**,⁹ the whole ASC group to come under the command of **Morris**. The group was then ordered to move three miles south and four miles west and await the arrival of divisional unit vehicles to replenish. And here, during a night of alarms, it waited.

While Supply Company had been moving back and preparing to replenish the Division, the Division itself had been engaging the enemy at **Minqar Qaim**. During 26 June, when Supply Column had been waiting and wondering at **Smugglers' Cove**, the closest enemy forces had been just beyond **Charing Cross**; they consisted of *90 Light Division* in the north, *21 Panzer Division* in the centre and *15 Panzer Division* in the south. On the 27th these forces began to describe a circle around the **Minqar Qaim** positions, moving in a clockwise direction between **Matruh** and the New Zealand Division.



Supply Company movements, June-November 1942

Supply Company movements, June-November 1942

After earlier shelling, the first enemy troops appeared through the dusty, hazy heat to the north about 10.30 a.m. No attack developed, but fire was exchanged, and **5 Brigade** transport in an exposed position north of the escarpment moved hurriedly, as it had been ordered to do if endangered. By 11 a.m. shelling was heavy, and soon after midday, after sending over ranging air bursts, enemy guns poured in a steady fire that was directed mainly at the New Zealand batteries. Attacks developed, and the New Zealand guns found plenty of tank targets to engage. The battle became mainly a duel between the Division's guns and enemy guns and tanks, and attached Supply Company vehicles, carrying ammunition for the guns, were moving back and forth across exposed ground, almost groaning under the weight of their loads. The attacks continued, and about 4 p.m., when enemy fire was intense, the truck of **Watson**¹⁰ and **Mitchell**,¹¹ who were serving **4 Field Regiment's** guns, was hit by a shell, Mitchell being wounded. An hour later a truck driven by **Dillon**¹² and **Shea**¹³ was also struck and both men were killed. The truck was destroyed by fire. In **5 Field Regiment's** lines **Duncan**¹⁴ was wounded in one leg, but carried on until he was forced to give up when, during heavy shelling, he was again wounded, this time in both legs. **Shaw**¹⁵ was also wounded, and a Supply Company truck destroyed.

Attacks continued towards evening, and **General Freyberg** was wounded while making a reconnaissance. **Brigadier Inglis** took over

command.

Towards dusk shelling died down, and a reconnaissance showed that the main enemy tank formations were preparing to laager. A strong force of between 300 and 400 vehicles was seen entering the Bir Abu Batta re-entrant to the east to shelter. The Division at the end of the day was encircled except for an area in the south-west where **1 Armoured Division** was operating. Clearly the New Zealand Division would have to retire before the enemy forces to the east became too strong. In any case the **Minqar Qaim** position was losing its value; the guns, because of the high rate of fire during the day, were down to thirty-five rounds each and once the batteries were silent the New Zealanders could do little to hinder the enemy.

The Division might have been able to escape by making a wide sweep to the south, but the going there was bad and a break-out to the east was planned. Fourth Brigade was to clear a gap, and its transport and **5 Brigade** were then to pass through. Fourth Brigade infantry would then remount its transport and head off to the east.

Transport was a critical problem; most of the second-line vehicles had been forced to make off for a safer location to the south, and efforts to locate them or raise them on the air failed. Every man who was not fighting, therefore, was stacked away on everything that was available: portees, quads, ammunition and petrol carriers, any first-line transport on hand.

Fourth Brigade's task was to attack the enemy group that had been seen entering the Bir Abu Batta re-entrant; **19 Battalion** was to lead, with **20** and **28** (Maori) Battalions in file on each flank. The Maoris were late arriving, and not until 1.50 a.m., more than an hour later, did the attack go forward. In the moonlight, with bayonets fixed, the infantry descended on the sleeping laager in Bir Abu Batta almost without warning; the first men to reach the lip were met with light fire, and as one man and without orders the three battalions broke into a run with a shout, the two flanking units fanning out. In a few minutes the

depression was a bubbling cauldron of tracer as the enemy fired wildly and blindly. With bayonets, rifles, tommy guns, Bren guns and grenades, the New Zealanders swept through the wadi.

Anxiously waiting, the men on the transport could see the battle flare up. Heading the divisional and **5 Brigade** transport, drawn up parallel with **4 Brigade's** waiting column, **Brigadier Inglis** decided to wait no longer. He moved off, and swung south. Before long, flares went up ahead, and the transport halted. As the challenge was not answered, the enemy group opened fire, and for some confused minutes the packed vehicles stood stolidly as a glorious target. Several vehicles, including an ammunition truck, burst into flames. Then the transport scattered: **Inglis** led one group east and eventually cleared the area; another group, eventually led home by Lieutenant-Colonel Russell, first rebounded in the direction from which it had come; and a third swung west and was gathered in by Lieutenant-Colonel **Glasgow** ¹⁶ and brought to safety.

Fourth Brigade transport, meanwhile, had moved as planned. As it began to move forward, Driver Mitchell, of Supply Company, saw an unattended New Zealand ambulance and darted across to it. Starting up, he joined the column. He later found a dead German in the back.

Fourth Brigade's action went like clockwork. As the transport growled past the southern end of the battle area, the infantry fought their way clear and embussed, and away the brigade went. A few miles to the east an enemy concentration opened fire from ahead, and the column swung south and then east again. By daylight it was well clear of the enemy and could halt for breakfast.

Waiting at the supply point in the desert, the ASC group under Morris could hear the battle clamouring to the northwest, but knew nothing of what was happening. Quirk was shivering under his blanket and trying to sleep when an artillery officer appeared out of the night and announced that the Division had been ambushed and cut up, and was scattered all over the desert. Stragglers, presumably from the scattered **5 Brigade** column, began to drift through at 5 a.m. with

alarming stories of being the sole survivors of the New Zealand Division. It was impossible to obtain accurate information from them, and Morris went off in search of Rear Division for further orders. All he could find at its location of the previous night were a few tanks of **1 Armoured Division**.

While Morris was away, a message was brought to the ASC group from Crump ordering it to move 20 miles east as soon as possible, and Morris returned to find the convoy already preparing to move. There was a fair amount of assorted transport going east as the convoy moved off. At the end of 20 miles the vehicles halted, and a hot breakfast was prepared.

The group was now south of **Fuka**, where the rest of the Division was to have met up. Morris at last located Headquarters NZASC and was instructed to send his petrol-carrying vehicles on with Rear Division, but to take the ammunition, water and supply trucks and endeavour to find 4 and 5 Brigades. Two hours later **4 Brigade**, moving east with a tank screen, was found. The ASC convoy joined the brigade, and moved back towards the Alamein Line across the hot, stony desert. The brigade halted at 9 p.m. near Deir el Qatani.

While this detachment was chasing the Division about the desert, the rest of Supply Company was moving back near the coast. On the night of 27–28 June it bivouacked 20 miles south of **Fuka**. At 8 a.m. on the 28th large groups of transport were seen to the north and south moving eastward at a good clip. It was obvious that a large-scale withdrawal was in progress, but as it had been intended to meet up with Morris's group here, Supply Company remained where it was. A church service was being conducted when Bracegirdle arrived with word that the company was to move east immediately to a point south of **Alamein**. 'No time was lost in moving,' noted Padre Holland.

As the company was moving away the headquarters trucks encountered a quad, with two limbers in tow, that had been halted with both rear tires blown out. Sergeant Boanas assured the artillerymen that

the workshops truck would be along in a moment, but discovered too late that the unit was not in arrowhead formation, as he had thought, but in echelon. The Supply Company men stayed to help switch the tires from a trailer to the quad, and then set off after the unit. They did not find it again until the 29th.

At 5 p.m. the head of the Supply Company convoy reached the **Matruh- Alexandria** road five miles west of **Alamein**, and turned towards the dispersal area one and a half miles south of the station.

In bright moonlight the cooks lit the burners, and throughout the dispersal area men were busily pumping up primuses. One primus flared up. The time was 8.55 p.m. and men were moving in towards the canteen truck for the nine o'clock **BBC** news; about twenty-four were already clustered about the radio. Four planes passed to the east, but they were showing lights and were assumed to be friendly. Three minutes later the planes came screaming in, and a stick of bombs sprouted across the area. The canteen truck dissolved in a roar and a cloud of dust and smoke, and a Company Headquarters vehicle burst into flames. About twelve planes pounded the area for 40 minutes.

On the ground there was a scurry. As the burning truck lit up the area and gave the planes an ideal target, prompt orders were given to platoon commanders to move sub-units away independently five or six miles to the east, but a minefield stretching north and south was a barrier. A hasty reconnaissance located a passage, and vehicles streamed through to spread across the desert. Within two hours the company was safely dispersed again.

Lieutenant Watt, meantime, had gone off in search of an ambulance; but while he was away an **American Field Service** ambulance, whose driver had seen the fire, arrived and took away the severest casualties. Later New Zealand ambulances came for the rest. Ten men were killed when the canteen truck was struck, and altogether twelve men were evacuated wounded, of whom two died. Those killed were Corporals **Macdonald** ¹⁷ and **Cornish**, ¹⁸ and Drivers **Cork**, ¹⁹

Clarke,²⁰ **Mathews,**²¹ **Scandrett,**²² **Harley,**²³ **Lynch,**²⁴ **McLeod,**²⁵ and **Goulden.**²⁶ The two who died later were Drivers **Campbell**²⁷ and **Sheehan.**²⁸

As 4 and 5 Brigades came bursting out of **Minqar Qaim**, 6 Brigade moved up from **Amiriya** to the Alamein Line and on 28 June took up a position in Fortress A, otherwise known as the **Kaponga Box**. As this brigade was making itself at home, the first scattered remnants of 4 and 5 Brigades came streaming in with fanciful stories of what had happened to the rest of the Division. Later more organised groups arrived, and by nightfall the New Zealand Division was more or less complete and intact behind the **Alamein** defences. And there was the significance of the **Minqar Qaim** action: unlike other units that had had to carve their way out, the New Zealand Division came through virtually unscathed and was immediately able to turn about and face the enemy.

As the enemy, his eyes on **Alexandria**, moved forward from **Matruh**, the thinly-held Alamein Line, less than 40 miles long and bounded on the north by the sea and on the south by the impassable **Qattara Depression**, lay across his path. At the head of the enemy advance came the three German divisions, 15 and 22 *Panzer* and 90 *Light*. To oppose them Eighth Army had 1 **South African Division** in the **Alamein Box** on the coast, the New Zealand Division in and by the **Kaponga Box**—or Fortress A—20 miles to south-south-west of this, and fifteen miles further in the same direction a small Indian brigade group in Fortress B, on the edge of the **Qattara Depression**, with little artillery and short of water. The three boxes left two gaps to be plugged: that in the north was filled by 18 **Indian Brigade** and that in the south by 7 **Armoured Division**.

On this general line Eighth Army parried, thrust and cut for almost four months. In the first few days the enemy tried to plunge straight through, but when he failed the line became largely static; salients swelled and shrank, the line buckled this way and that, but in general neither side gave or gained ground until the victorious October attack.

On 28 June the enemy was cautiously following up the precipitately fleeing Eighth Army, and **6 Brigade**, in the **Kaponga Box**, was told that he was expected in thirty-six hours. His aircraft were probing ahead, however, and on the night of 28–29 June struck at any visible target in the fortress area.

In the light of the 29th Supply Company found it had lost one three-tonner and that five others were damaged—punctured radiators, petrol tanks, tires and so on.

At 10.30 a.m. Morris's composite group opened a supply point on the eastern side of the fortress on a track leading to **Alamein**. In an area bristling with artillery and anti-tank guns one day's rations (12,565) and water were issued. Because of the long mileages covered by trucks, the full 30,000 gallons of petrol had to be issued and a further 19,000 gallons obtained from a South African unit before all demands could be met. Of the 26,272 rations brought out of **Matruh**, Supply Company now had 13,707 left.

The issuing, done in bulk direct from trucks, went on throughout the scorching day. At 6.30 p.m. Headquarters NZASC instructed Company Headquarters and all detachments to move to a new location four miles east of the fortress. Only 1 Platoon, partly empty from issuing, and 5 Platoon were able to move, however. Company Headquarters and other platoons, including those still issuing, were too far away to act on the order. They moved next morning.

In the blistering heat of a wadi, issuing again went on throughout the 30th. Sappers were erecting wire nearby, and a long series of blasting charges on a ridge caused a minor scare at the supply point. The water, ammunition and petrol companies promptly moved off, leaving the supply detachment with the supply point to itself.

Another detachment from Supply Company, meanwhile, drew from 86 FMC the first replenishments since leaving **Matruh**. During these important two days, therefore, the Division had been sustained by that

vital, last-minute loading up.

On the morning of the 30th the Division sorted itself out. To man completely its four-battalion box, **6 Brigade** had taken **28 Battalion** under command, and **4 and 5 Brigades** and **Divisional Headquarters** moved to the **Munassib Depression**, nine miles to the south-east, from where mobile columns could operate. At 12.45 p.m. Supply Company was instructed to move to Point 78, just over 22 miles away and 12 miles to the east of the Munassib position. Soft sand bogged down many vehicles, and the company had to bivouac for the night five miles short of its objective. It moved forward next morning to join the rest of the ASC companies.

On 1 July, with the New Zealand Division now settled down, Supply Company got its affairs into order. So that all units would have two days' reserves, it issued 32,827 rations and 9598 gallons of water.

In the north on this day the enemy was assaulting the **Alamein Box**, but in the New Zealand sector all that was to be seen was a large group of enemy tanks and motor vehicles at extreme field-gun range. From **25 Battalion's** positions a vast, smoke-shrouded plain could be seen to the north-west, dotted with shadowy vehicles that moved about like aimless ants.

Supply Company saw little to worry it at the supply point, but a Messerschmitt returning home skimmed over at about fifty feet. Quirk, in his truck, 'waited for the squirt. Watched him turn around and come back just behind me. Could see the pilot's face. In the excitement one of my trucks nearly caught fire when some bags got against the exhaust.' While the Messerschmitt still whined low overhead, Staff-Sergeant **Fry**²⁹ leaped from his truck and beat out the flames with his hands, receiving burns. The convoy reached home unscathed.

On 2 July the Indian brigade was withdrawn from Fortress B, making the New Zealand positions the southern flank of the line.

As the enemy pummelled the northern positions, Eighth Army

prepared to counter-attack from the south. The 19th Battalion came out from Munassib and in a highly successful attack on the 3rd raked in 350 Italian prisoners from the *Ariete Division* and a large quantity of equipment. Two 19 Battalion men who escorted them back found them 'a dirty, greasy, unkempt mob, quite without fighting spirit,' and Quirk, who had 130 of them 'dumped' on him suddenly at the supply point, described them as a 'poor lot' and wondered, 'could we be retreating from this trash.'

Sixth Brigade, meanwhile, was withdrawn from the *Kaponga Box*, Supply Company transport assisting with the move.

Over the next few days 4 and 5 Brigades pushed out into a salient; 5 Brigade on the night of 4–5 July attacked Italians in the *El Mreir Depression*, and 4 Brigade moved up abreast of it to the west. Then, as the enemy began to outflank the position, the brigades were drawn back on the 7th.

It was decided now to establish the line east of the *Kaponga Box* to shorten the corps front. And for a while the line became stable.

Throughout all these moves and counter-moves, Supply Company had been shifting, too. On the evening of the 4th it was ordered to move seven miles due west of Point 78, where it would presumably be more conveniently placed for the two attacking brigades. As it was moving, Stukas were bombing *Divisional Headquarters*, and a damaged machine drifted down about a mile away, crash-landed and nosed over. A vehicle went out and picked up an immaculately dressed and extremely reticent German pilot. He was later handed over to the Intelligence Officer at *Divisional Headquarters*.

Soft sand again bogged down the unit after it had gone only four miles, and the move was completed next morning. Company Headquarters was established at *Mirbat Aza*.

The replenishment area was now three miles south-east of the

Kaponga Box, which placed it more or less south of the El Mreir battle area. On the 6th the supply convoy, moving in front of the artillery and over a ridge, drew the unwelcome attention of enemy artillery. Behind time on this day, the company convoy found the unit vehicles waiting without much regard for dispersal principles, but Stukas that dive-bombed and machine-gunned the area 'caused most to shift and many to take to the hills'. There were no provosts for a while, and there was further delay while order was restored.

The 7th July was a day of alarm and despondency. News that the Division was pulling back gave the inference that Eighth Army was on its way again. And Lieutenant **Triggs**³⁰ came up from Base with reports of a 'terrific flap' and destruction of records. But the next day brought more reassuring tidings, and everything returned to normal.

Supply Company was now getting into its stride. As different from the Second Libyan Campaign as that campaign had been from the Greek debacle, the stand at **Alamein** brought the company into a semi-static role, and for the first time since it was formed almost three years previously it was operating in very much the manner in which it was designed to operate—behind a more or less fixed line as the final supply link in the line of communications.

But it was not working entirely as the good book said it should. Very early in the campaign—on 2 July—it developed a new supply point technique that shuttled vehicles through with the streamlined efficiency of a snack-bar service. The supply trucks were formed into a broad U, with vehicles 150 yards apart and the mouth of the U measuring 400 yards across. At one end of the U a control point regulated the flow of unit vehicles and checked off units as they passed. The vehicles would work around the U, picking up a different commodity from each truck and emerging at the far end fully laden.

And so, day by day, the steady work of providing three daily meals and water for sufficient men to form a sizeable town went on under the blazing mid-summer sun: rations were drawn from a field maintenance

centre, carried forward and issued; water was drawn from a water point, carried forward and issued. And this was necessarily done to some sort of a timetable; 'some sort', because the records show that some delays were inevitable. In an organisation like the Army it is rarely that everything can go as planned; there are too many hostile people doing their best to ungun the best-laid schemes and, on the friendly side, too many ways in which misunderstandings and errors can upset arrangements.

But as the Division's provider, Supply Company (to which the **Divisional Postal Unit** was attached on 8 July) kept up a daily routine in a manner that drew the approval of Brigadier Crump when he visited the supply point on 13 July.

He would not have been so pleased the following day, when the penalty for being late was exemplified. No. 2 Platoon had unloaded supplies at the replenishment point, leaving 5 Platoon to break bulk and issue. No. 4 Platoon of 6 RMT, attached for water duties, arrived late, and there was an unhealthy cluster of impatient vehicles in the replenishment area when, around noon—half an hour after the supply point should have completed its work and closed down—eighteen Stukas screamed down from the hazy sky and 'started in on the water section'. Bomb bursts belched and billowed, then the aircraft came round again with tearing machine guns. In the Ammunition Company area two burning trucks showered out fireworks; one contained high-explosive and the other three-inch mortar ammunition. The petrol and supply points escaped with minor damage, but both the water and ammunition points suffered severely. The badly dispersed B echelon transport also caught its share, and among the trucks hit was one containing reinforcements, some of whom were killed. Total casualties were twenty-one killed and about fifty wounded; these included three Ammunition Company men who were killed. ³¹ Issuing was resumed as soon as the attack ceased.

In spite of such incidents as these, however, the supply lines were now acknowledged to be working smoothly, and the company as early as 10 July had begun to supplement its normal ration work by bringing up

welcome cargoes of beer, cigarettes and other luxury items from **Alexandria**. Beer, incidentally, was a hazard in itself, as it drew B echelon transport to the supply point like flies to meat, and it became a strenuous task when beer was on issue to keep adequate dispersal.

Both sides were preparing for offensive action in mid-July. On the 14th the New Zealanders went into action again when 4 and 5 Brigades attacked and secured **Ruweisat Ridge**. Although supporting tanks were unable to reach them, the infantry clung to the ridge throughout the next day, but towards evening enemy tanks overran 4 **Brigade** units, and that night a withdrawal was ordered. Just a week later—21 July—the New Zealanders again attacked. With heavy air and artillery support, 6 **Brigade** attacked at dusk and secured its objective, but at daylight on the 22nd tanks again overran the lonely infantry. On the 27th Eighth Army tried again with attacks in the north while the New Zealanders made a diversionary feint in the south, but this also failed, and when August came the line was static.

With minor scares and occasional moves, Supply Company finished out July in routine manner. The men often worked within sight and sound of battle, and there was occasional air activity, both British and enemy, and occasional bombing. The **Ruweisat Ridge** attack of 14 July brought in a swarm of German and Italian prisoners, badly clothed and thirsty.

The daily issue now included rum, and in general the rations were good. A sample, issued on 21 July: sixteen ounces of M and V, twelve ounces of bread, four ounces of sausages, two ounces of tinned fruit, one ounce of margarine, three ounces of sugar, two ounces of milk, one ounce of cheese, three-quarters of an ounce of tea, and ten cigarettes. Beer was also a regular item, but was a charge against unit funds and was not an issue. Later in the month fresh limes were issued. An unusual demand from the troops was quicklime; the Italians had buried the dead just below the sand, and the stench was bringing in hordes of already insufferable flies. Lime was issued on 31 July.

July was a month of discomforts. The weather swung full circle from chilling morning mists to blazing noon heat. Flies were maddening, and on the night of 28–29 July mosquitoes came over the battle area in a cloud, apparently blown by an unusual wind. And, as a final burden to morale, mail was woefully out of date. It was noted on 30 July that Aulsebrook's biscuits then being issued were packed in the previous April, making them of more recent vintage than the latest mail received.

The first day of August was hot and calm. Operating now from Deir el Agram, Supply Company was working largely to routine. It was a month of inactivity, of almost casual exchanges of fire. The main enemy now was discomfort in the form of flies, heat and tedium; from their inhospitable rocky positions, the troops looked through the dust and shimmering haze, and waited.

But it was a month of changes, significant changes. Beneath the somnolent heat both armies were preparing—the enemy to drive on **Alexandria** and **Cairo**, Eighth Army to destroy the Axis forces. Lieutenant-General B. L. Montgomery became Army Commander, and General Sir Harold Alexander became Commander-in-Chief, Middle East Forces. More men, fresh materials, better weapons were arriving. And—the unlikeliest of all visitors in this barren spot— **Mr Churchill** spent some days of August looking around the desert.

Even for a new broom, Montgomery swept exceedingly clean. His presence was felt immediately throughout Eighth Army. To those with whom he came into contact he brought a new spirit of resolution; and to those who did not see him he made his intention and mood clear with an order that troop-carrying transport was to be sent back, and dumps of supplies and ammunition formed within units.

From **13 Corps** on 15 August came an order that three days' supplies were to be dumped. This was superseded two days later by an order that come through **2 NZ Division** Administration Instruction No. 13, which said:

- 1. Six days' normal battle rations will be dumped in defended localities.**
- 2. All battle rations at present held by units will be dumped; the balance will be drawn from NZASC.**
- 3. NZASC will issue three days' vehicle rations. These vehicle rations will be carried by unit B echelon.**

These supplies and ammunition reserves were to be dumped and buried, and normal daily replenishments were to continue. The positions now being prepared could thus withstand long attack, if necessary, without replenishment.

The loading up of Supply Company trucks at 86 FMC on 17 August went on until well after dark. The next day, while harassed quartermasters fired questions at equally harassed Supply Company men, the issue—a record to date—was made. 'I just stood in front of the office truck all day and talked and explained to people what and why [about] the ration situation,' Quirk wrote in his diary. 'Messes [Messerschmitts] came down close and gave us a slight scare.'

At the end of the day the issue, which included that to [132 Brigade](#) of 44 Division which was attached to the Division, totalled: fresh 11,669; hard 4788; vehicle 35,763; battle 47,968; total 100,188. In addition, 14,158 gallons of water were issued.

Its task done, Supply Company was withdrawn 12 miles to the north-east to a point eight miles almost due south of El Ruweisat station. B echelon vehicles went some 25 miles further back to Swordfish area. But while the B echelon transport was shifted to add tenacity to the Division's resistance, Supply Company was moved because Deir el Agram was now being prepared to 'receive' the enemy. These preparations were reflected in an instruction from NZASC Headquarters on 22 August that from that date a signal despatched at 7 a.m. each day would inform whether the track to the replenishment area, still in Deir el Agram, was safe.

Signs of preparations were to be seen everywhere. On 24 August Quirk described in his diary the routine trip to the replenishment area:

Up early and away to replenishment area by new track inside the fortified area. Z track being made, interesting trip, and the going was not as bad as I expected. Dummy camps, with dummy men on latrines, etc. Signs of enemy bombing. Everything delivered without much fuss.... Home for lunch, and then shifted to our new area. Just dust and sand and many tracks.... Terrible crowding as we were breaking bulk. 25 pounders everywhere as three full regiments just arrived. Going to be something doing here. New guns, and digging in near us as we worked.

Supply Company was getting in the way again. The move, one mile to the north, had been made to give armoured units a clear area, but even in its new area the company had artillery digging in among the biscuits.

While all these preparations were going on, there were small changes in the Supply Company's sphere, too. 'Hard tack' was being replaced or supplemented by fresh New Zealand meat, fresh vegetables, tomatoes, cucumber, limes and bread. The rum had caused some sickness, probably through an overdose, and was reduced to a twice-weekly issue and cut to 1/160th of a ration a man instead of the standard 1/64th, or half a gill.

Another change was the attachment of four men from Ordnance who formed the nucleus of an advance ordnance depot in the replenishment area.

In addition to its normal work of supplying the Division, Supply Company took under its wing the newly arrived **132 Brigade**; the company carried out the joint task of supplying the brigade until the British unit could get its own RASC operating and of training the RASC men in desert craft. Equipped with two-wheel-drive trucks and hopelessly inexperienced in desert driving, the RASC drivers made hard work of the soft sand, and their dispersal was recorded as being 'appalling'. On 20 August Morris was attached to the brigade's RASC as an instructor, and on the 26th an exchange of drivers was made: twenty-nine RASC men joined Supply Company and the same number of Supply Company men went to the brigade.

As August began to run out rumour of an impending enemy attack came through. Among other things, the supply point was a gossip point, and day by day there were odd snippets of information: stories of impending attacks, of impending leave, of impending enemy movement. And much of it was surprisingly accurate. On 26 August there was word of imminent enemy action. The Maoris had been out on patrol the previous night and brought in forty Italian prisoners, who were reported to have said that the attack was supposed to start the previous night but the Germans had postponed it. They had told the Italians that they would be in **Alexandria** in a fortnight—or the British would be in **Tripoli** in a month.

This, in general, was the situation; the timing was far out, but the alternatives were just what faced the enemy. He was now preparing to make a bid for the first.

Two days after the garrulous Italians in the replenishment area talked about Rommel's coming attack, General Montgomery talked about it too. To a conference of his officers he said, 'There will be no withdrawals—absolutely none—none whatever—none.'

On the 'other side of the hill', Rommel's ideas were different. Just before he launched his attack, his order of the day stated, 'Today the army, reinforced by new divisions, will launch a new attack in order finally to destroy the enemy.'

He attacked just before midnight on 30 August. Using almost all his armour, the best of his infantry, between 3000 and 4000 lorries and large numbers of guns, he struck through the southern minefields. He planned to turn north behind Eighth Army's line, destroy or drive away the British armour, and then crush the infantry. If he failed to reach the coast in his first drive, he hoped to lure the British tanks into a counter-attack and then destroy them with his anti-tank weapons.

Eighth Army had prepared its positions to meet just this type of attack. Entrenched infantry and guns and tanks in hull-down positions,

forming a line facing south, waited to sweep the area over which the enemy must approach.

The New Zealand Division was in a box on the west end—or right—of this line. The box faced west, south and east, like a fortress turret, with **5 Brigade** facing south, **132 Brigade** (the British formation under command) facing west, and **6 Brigade**, between the other two brigades, facing west, south-west and south.

After passing through the minefields south of the Division the enemy swung northwards against the **Alam Halfa** positions. There, practically immobilised by the lack of petrol—promised stocks did not arrive—he faced the British armour, which had been ordered not to fight in the open but to hold its positions. On 1 September the enemy's transport was packed in a fine massed target for guns and aircraft, and evasive action was hindered by soft sand; he had to waste precious fuel unbogging vehicles. The punishment continued on 2 September, and on the 3rd the enemy fell back behind a protective screen of guns. That night **132 Brigade** and 5 NZ Brigade attacked south to gain observation over the Deir el Munassib depression. Despite heavy casualties they gained part of their objectives. The 10th and 7th Armoured Divisions slowly followed, and when the line was restored Rommel's last chance was gone. His strength was wasted, and Eighth Army stood as firmly as ever.

But it didn't seem quite as rosy to those who know only what they were able to pick up. For once the supply point failed to yield reliable information, and there was a vague feeling of disappointment that the enemy had slipped away again. **Alam Halfa**, a static battle and a static victory, did not proclaim itself with an exhilarating advance, and to men whose only certain guide to their army's fortune was movement forward or backward it looked like another profitless stalemate.

From the beginning it was very evident to rear units such as Supply Company that the enemy was making a forceful bid. The sky was full of black-crossed wings, and bombs and machine-gun fire rained on

surrounding ridges and roads. Brigadier Crump was at the supply point on 31 August, the first day of the battle. He was told by 'Tich', the Maori ration corporal, that now the battle had started the Maoris wanted battle rations; they were short of transport, and it was better to carry rations in the stomach.

'What about in two days' time?' asked the CRASC.

'Plenty of macaroni and spaghetti,' was the answer.

On 1 September 86 FMC, from which the company had been drawing, had disappeared, but it was found near **Burg el Arab**, 18 miles back, thoroughly disorganised.

In the circumstances the move was prudent. Nearer the front it was becoming lively. As he pressed into the salient the enemy brought Y track, the narrow, bumpy road to the replenishment area, under fire. Soft sand prevented dispersal and meant that vehicles had to crawl in single file, unable to scatter or speed up if fired on. A small convoy carrying cigarettes and tobacco, having waited for the signal to go, was halted for an hour on the track until shelling ahead had ceased. As it slackened, Lieutenant Nelson, leading the convoy, began to rush his trucks through, but twice had to halt and go to ground. Bombs were thundering on Z track, 400 yards to the left, and on the **Alam Halfa** feature, 800 yards to the right.

At the replenishment area everything was quiet, 'except QM's, who close in on us from all sides,' **Nelson** noted in his diary. 'We off-load most of the stuff on the ground, and have provost on job dispersing. Units still crowd, and some have moans. But things are crashing all around us, and we are trying to dish this stuff out....We finish by 1200. More bombing on Halfa. Plane down in old R. Div area. Cup of tea, and Home.'

Throughout the day air activity was intense; Bostons and Baltimores were running a 'ferry service' to the west, and overhead fighters moved willingly in dogfights.

The battle seemed to be clamouring all around as the replenishment convoy crawled nervously along the track on the 2nd. At the congested replenishment area there were 'tanks, vehicles, guns everywhere. 25 pounders blazing away and Jerry shells coming back.' Black-rimmed bomb craters scarred the whole area. As the company convoy was pulling out for the return journey, enemy bombs thundered away to the right, and a vast pall of dust and smoke floated up towards where black ack-ack rosettes were chasing the planes across the sky.

The 3rd September was another noisy day, with the RAF's 'ferry service' still roaring overhead. Next day the run up to the replenishment area was peaceful, and air activity was lessening. On the 5th 86 FMC found the situation reassuring enough to move forward to its old position again. That day Supply Company issued its millionth ration of the campaign.

Eighth Army now turned its attention back to the task of building up for its own offensive. There was now time for the troops to relax.

There was some cleaning up to be done, too. In the wreck-strewn battle area, among the disembowelled tanks, burnt-out transport and wrecked aircraft, English troops salvaged and buried with a sang-froid that in at least one instance amounted to a sublime naiveté. While passing through the area Quirk paused to watch a squad at work on a destroyed German tank, whose driver was 'rotting at the controls'. Two voices came clearly to him.

'B---collar bone, Percy.'

'Don't be---silly. It's his knee cap, Alf.'

'Dig him out anyway. What a---smell. Have a good look for some ackers, Percy.'

The New Zealanders were withdrawn on 10 September and began a period of leave and training. Fourth Brigade went back to Maadi to train

and equip as an armoured brigade. The British 151 Brigade replaced **132 Brigade**, which was badly battered in the **Alam Halfa** battle, as part of the Division.

While some Supply Company men were released on leave, the main part of the company moved to the beach five miles west of **Burg el Arab** and for six days enjoyed the luxury of the sparkling **Mediterranean**.

Then, the rest over, the Division knuckled down to preparing itself for its role in the battle that was to be the turning point of the war. With some bitterness the New Zealanders saw men of **9 Armoured Brigade**, which was to join the two New Zealand brigades to form a separate formation, painting fernleaves on their tanks. The failures of British armour in the earlier **Alamein** days rankled, and rightly or wrongly the New Zealanders believed that if there were New Zealanders in the tanks they could have confidence in their armour. But the days of this arrangement were still a long way off.

This distrust, however, was broken down with fraternising and a general programme of mixing and combining in exercises. When it came to battle, the tanks did everything any infantryman could have expected of them.

The Division was sent into an 'attack' in conditions resembling as closely as possible those that would be encountered in the actual battle. As the preliminaries were carried out in the bright moonlight of the night of 25–26 September Supply Company floundered through soft going to a replenishment area and—in contrast to an earlier attempt at the unfamiliar task of issuing at night—issued 11,378 hard rations, 1350 fresh rations and 11,578 gallons of water without a hitch.

On 3 October the weather turned on a freakish display. Late in the afternoon flocks of birds were seen hurrying to the east, and behind them came a yellow-tinged black cloud. Then an impenetrable duststorm, through which thunder rolled, blacked out the landscape and unbelievably great hailstones 'as big as Wog eggs' pelted down, shredding

the fabric top of a car. When the storm passed the men had the unusual experience of sucking ice in the desert.

On 10 October the water section was pleased to receive, in exchange for its flimsies, robust pressed-steel containers.

There were now some strange sights to be seen about the desert: plywood and canvas trucks and tanks, and trucks dressed as tanks and tanks dressed as trucks. Quirk came back to the unit one day vastly amused at having seen a tank (dressed as a truck) and a truck (dressed as a tank) ironically offering each other the right of way. Supply Company itself had a hand in this deception plan when [Pryde](#) assumed command of Swordfish area on 16 October. Each night dummy vehicles and tanks would be moved to create, for the benefit of enemy reconnaissance planes, the illusion of ground movement by real vehicles, and during daylight hours British trucks, equipped with beaters similar to the drum and chain arrangement fitted to the Scorpion tank,³² stirred up dust to simulate the movement of large mobile groups.

The last pre-battle issue was made on 22 October. It consisted of two days' battle rations, 30,883. Units now carried three days' rations and water in addition to normal reserves, thus making it unnecessary for replenishment transport to clutter up the tracks to the front during the battle. That night the infantry moved up Star, Bottle and Boat tracks, each distinctively marked with its lighted symbol—there were also Sun, Moon and Hat tracks—and by daylight were safely concealed in their positions.

Supply Company, its work done for the meantime, remained far away to the south-east until the following day, when it moved up a track via [Alam Shaltut](#) to the coast road, thence west past [Burg el Arab](#) to a point near the railway line just west of the gypsum factory.

The stage was set for the battle of [Alamein](#).

¹ [L-Cpl J. H. Halliday](#); born NZ, 14 Sep 1911; labourer; died of

accidental injuries 19 Jun 1942.

² Maj D. A. Smith, m.i.d.; Wellington; born Wellington, 16 Jul 1903; draper; CO NZASC Base Depot Jul 1944-Jan 1945.

³ Maj T. V. Nelson, ED, m.i.d.; born Napier, 16 Dec 1917; school teacher died 19 Oct 1952.

⁴ Cpl G. T. Reynolds; Wellington; born Dunedin, 10 Mar 1914; clerk.

⁵ L-Sgt C. E. Hardaker; born Australia, 18 Nov 1908; accidentally killed 27 Jun 1942.

⁶ Maj H. W. Barnett, OBE, m.i.d.; born NZ, 26 Feb 1906; motor mechanic.

⁷ Lt-Col O. Bracegirdle, DSO, ED, m.i.d.; Auckland; born Auckland, 14 Aug 1911; 2 i/c HQ Comd NZASC Nov 1943-Jun 1945.

⁸ Capt W. K. Jones; Te Puke; born England, 24 Apr 1911; transport contractor.

⁹ Capt S. W. Burkett, m.i.d.; Hobart; born Methven, 27 May 1906; accountant.

¹⁰ Dvr R. J. Watson; Gore; born NZ, 23 Oct 1917; carrier.

¹¹ Cpl M. M. D. L. Mitchell; born NZ, 8 Oct 1919; transport driver; wounded 27 Jun 1942.

¹² Dvr D. W. Dillon; born NZ, 6 Jan 1918; road worker; killed in action 27 Jun 1942.

13 Cpl D. M. P. Shea; born NZ, 15 May 1918; shop assistant; killed in action 27 Jun 1942.

14 L-Cpl F. L. Duncan; Dunedin; born Dunedin, 17 Jun 1919; law clerk; wounded 27 Jun 1942.

15 Dvr W. Shaw; Otago; born NZ, 8 Jul 1918; platelayer; wounded 27 Jun 1942.

16 Col K. W. R. Glasgow, DSO, ED, m.i.d.; Wellington; born Wellington, 15 Nov 1902; headmaster; CO 14 Lt AA Regt 1941, 5 Fd Regt 1941-43; OC Troops 6 NZ Div May-Aug 1943; GSO 1 NZ, Maadi Camp 1944; Rector, Scots College, Wellington.

17 Cpl G. W. Macdonald; born Australia, 23 Aug 1912; clicker; killed in action 28 Jun 1942.

18 Cpl T. A. Cornish; born England, 9 Jan 1905; brewery employee; killed in action 28 Jun 1942.

19 Dvr J. H. M. Cork; born Oamaru, 26 Nov 1901; agent and farmer; killed in action 28 Jun 1942.

20 Dvr J. M. Clarke; born Christchurch, 13 Nov 1912; carpenter; killed in action 28 Jun 1942.

21 Dvr F. Mathews; born Ireland, 11 Nov 1907; labourer; killed in action 28 Jun 1942.

22 Dvr C. Scandrett; born Invercargill, 25 Jan 1912; plumber; killed in action 28 Jun 1942.

23 Dvr J. F. Harley; born NZ, 26 Oct 1915; storeman; killed in action 28 Jun 1942.

24 Dvr K. J. Lynch; born NZ, 21 Dec 1919; farm labourer; killed in action 28 Jun 1942.

25 Dvr G. S. McLeod; born Dunedin, 17 Apr 1916; killed in action 28 Jun 1942.

26 Dvr H. S. Goulden; born NZ, 17 May 1910; grocer; killed in action 28 Jun 1942.

27 Dvr F. E. P. Campbell; born NZ, 17 Jul 1918; labourer; died of wounds 29 Jun 1942.

28 Dvr J. F. Sheehan; born NZ, 20 Oct 1910; bushman; died of wounds 29 Jun 1942.

29 Lt H. W. Fry, m.i.d.; Wellington; born Ootocamund, India, 2 Nov 1910; actuarial clerk.

30 Capt N. S. Triggs; Wellington; born Napier, 25 Dec 1909; salesman.

31 This was the worst bombing NZ Div ever suffered.

32 The Scorpion tank, which threshed the ground with chain flails, was used to clear a path through a minefield.

SUPPLY COMPANY

CHAPTER 10 – THE PURSUIT

CHAPTER 10

The Pursuit

WHEN the guns flashed into life at 9.40 p.m. on 23 October some Supply Company men were sleeping, some were waiting and watching, others—a group of officers—had gone forward for a closer view. Blue and white flashes and the thunder of gunfire filled the night.

For fifteen minutes the guns poured shells on every known enemy battery. Then, at 10 p.m., as the infantry went forward, the guns dropped to the enemy forward defence lines. The break-in, the first stage of the battle, had begun.

While **30 Corps**, of which the New Zealand Division was a part, made the main attack in the north, **13 Corps** made a showing of a major assault in the south. By dawn part of **30 Corps** was still slightly short of the night's objective, the general line from the **Miteiriya Ridge** northwards to near the coast, but a break-in had been accomplished.

When daylight came the bombers, Bostons and Mitchells in groups of eighteen, droned forward, and scarcely without pause ran a shuttle service throughout the day; from where it was camped Supply Company could see two groups on their way forward as two came back.

There was work to be done, however, and even in the heat of battle it was routine work. The chaos of **Greece**, **Crete** and **Libya** had gone, and as the enemy was met on a clearly defined front, the rear services of which Supply Company was a part operated in the sane and orderly manner in which the textbooks had always contemplated they should. The only danger was from the air, and even that hazard was now negligible.

Paradoxical as it might seem, while the Army was making an all-out bid in the most significant battle in the war to date, many of the rear services were not required to perform any extra effort. In any well-planned operation there comes a time when the hustle and bustle of administrative preparation ceases and the whole organisation, wound up

like clockwork, begins to move forward under its own power. The climax for many is anti-climax, and on the first day of the **Alamein** battle there was nothing for Supply Company to do but deliver 16,947 battle rations to units at the replenishment area and carry out some minor reorganisation within itself. This consisted of a handover by 5 Platoon to 4 Platoon of its '12,000 millstones', reserve battle rations. Water for the moment was not a Supply Company worry as units were now drawing direct from the water point at **El Hammam**.

As the 'dog fight' developed in the northern wedge, the Supply Company war diary read like this:

25th: 1 platoon issues 10,537 consolidated rations taken forward on No. 2 platoon transport. 1 platoon uplifts 13,488 hard rations from 52 DID and returns to No. 4 platoon, which breaks bulk for delivery tomorrow.

26th: 1 platoon moves forward to replenishment area and delivers 6089 fresh rations. No. 2 platoon uplifts 4500 fresh rations from 52 DID. As demands on unit transport are very light, personnel are organising games of soccer between platoons.

'The short lines of supply on a fixed front have made our job easy, and the way we've been spending our time lately you'd hardly guess there was a war on let alone in full swing,' Corporal Reynolds wrote home. 'Been playing footy and cricket as though this was a base camp.' This was not as fantastic as it might sound, for even fighting units in reserve positions found time to send men back for a swim.

Passing ambulances, however, were a reminder that there really was a war on, and an issue of 7434 rations on 28 October to rear units and field ambulances had its significance; five days earlier, on the eve of the battle, the same issue had required only 2536 rations.

On the night of 27–28 October the New Zealand infantry withdrew from the line to prepare for a new role in the breakthrough, code-named **SUPERCHARGE**. Changing circumstances made a change of plan necessary, and when the scheme was finally fixed the New Zealand Division was to hold a firm base behind the attacking **151 (Tyneside) Brigade** and **152**

(Highland) Brigade, which were to be under New Zealand command, as also would be **9 Armoured Brigade** and **23 Armoured Brigade**. The **1st Armoured Division** was to break through the gap made by the assault, destroy the remaining German tank force, and the mobile New Zealand Division, with **4 Light Armoured Brigade** as a spearhead, was to crash through after it.

The plan went into operation in the early hours of 2 November, and by dawn **9 Armoured Brigade** had dented the enemy line at Tell el Aqqaqir. Hard fighting followed, and by the afternoon of 3 November the Division was ready to sally out from the bulge. The gap through which it was to go would permit only a single line of vehicles, and to solve supply problems in the first few days, units were to carry eight days' food and water.

The New Zealand Division began its thrust on the 4th; the armour was already engaging the panzers, and as the Division struck out first to the south-west and then swung north-west, the armoured battle was clamouring to the north. Next day, in desert formation, the Division cruised west with the object of securing high ground above **Fuka**.

At a cautious distance the administrative services followed. Still taking it easy in the sunshine near **El Hammam**, Supply Company roused itself on the afternoon of 4 November, and at 2 p.m. moved forward and down into the desert. The next day at 2 p.m., in company with Petrol and Ammunition Companies, it moved up the congested Springbok track to the main road, thence west past **Alamein** station to a point south of Tell el Eisa. There were 'minefields galore, and people being blown up'. Just west of **Alamein** station that night a British unit was celebrating Guy Fawkes Day with captured flares. An enemy plane joined in with some fireworks of its own, and the display promptly fizzled out.

Three types of trouble complicated Supply Company's work during the breakthrough: wrong map references, including a few that would have taken the company out to sea; weather; and congestion and

confusion. The last was the first encountered. From Tell el Eisa 2 and 5 Platoons set out along Boomerang track early in the evening with a replenishment convoy under the SSO, Major Bracegirdle. There were, in all, 200 vehicles consisting of **Petrol Company** and Supply Company trucks, **5 Field Park Company**, and an escort of one company from **27 (Machine Gun) Battalion** and three armoured cars. Soon it was dark. Dust rolled up in clouds, and vehicles jostled for elbow room. There were frequent halts of from ten to thirty minutes; drivers groped forward at a crawl; vehicles dropped into slit trenches. One driver reports covering four miles in eight hours before halting for the night. Vehicles were crowded in on all sides, and dispersal was impossible. The head of the column halted at midnight when the divisional axis of advance was reached.

Headed by 4 Light Armoured Brigade, the New Zealand Division fighting units in the meantime had reached the high ground south of **Fuka**, where guns were screening the tail end of the escaping enemy forces. On the 6th the New Zealand units pressed on with the task of securing the **Baggush** landing grounds and holding them so that the **RAF** could operate from them undisturbed; they were also to sweep clear the coastal area to **Baggush**, thence west to **Charing Cross**. As the Division moved forward again light rain turned into a downpour, and everywhere vehicles became bogged in the softening desert. By evening the Division had reached a position south of the **Baggush** escarpment. That night fresh orders were received for an advance through the minefields south of **Matruh**, but the rain poured down and the surface water spread to lakes, and the Division could only squat in despondent helplessness while the enemy made good use of the sealed main road to slip away once again.

Many miles behind, the ASC units and the B echelon vehicles that had gone back to meet them were in a similar plight. The replenishment convoy that had been halted by darkness and confusion somehow pieced itself together on the morning of the 6th and pushed forward to the replenishment area at **Alam el Halif**. It was then 11.30 a.m. and the

convoy was eighteen hours late. Only one vehicle, from a light anti-aircraft battery, was there for supplies. Fifth Brigade commander, because of the tactical situation, had not released his B echelon transport on the 5th. However, the **5 Brigade** vehicles and those from divisional units and **9 Armoured Brigade** turned up in the afternoon and issues were made; Supply Company issued 9004 rations. Loaded B echelon transport began the return trip to their units, and 5 Platoon of Supply Company turned back to 208 FMC, where 13,000 battle rations were drawn.

The main part of Supply Company during this time had issued about 4000 rations to rear units on the morning of the 6th and then struck out into the desert through the minefields and litter of burnt-out tanks and derelicts of all descriptions. Hordes of Italians were wandering about looking for someone to take them prisoner. Away to the left a burning plane smeared a tracer of smoke across the sky, and shortly afterwards a German pilot, who had apparently bailed out, stepped into the path of the Supply Company convoy, clicked his heels together and raised his hands to the surrender position in a smart drill movement. Eager searchers found a photograph of **Hitler**, which Captain Smith tore in half, and the address of a girl in **Alexandria**. And, of course, a Luger pistol.

The airman was only one, though certainly the most impressive, of the prisoners rounded up by Supply Company. A 'forlorn individual wandering across the desert' turned out to be a very small, thin and miserable German, completely a-tremble. He wore the Iron Cross. He spoke good English and stated that a party of Italians was in a wadi about half a mile away waiting to be picked up. Reynolds, who escorted them back to the prisoner-or-war cage, recorded that 'you would have thought it was a leave party they were so darned cheerful'.

The sky clouded over, and during the afternoon rain set in, but the company reached **Alam el Halif** without difficulty. Early next morning a convoy set out for the new replenishment area at a landing ground near **Baggush**. As the rest of the company followed on, the grey rain beat

dancing patterns across the spreading sheets of water. Desert tires squelched through tenacious mud, and one by one the floundering vehicles buried their wheels and stopped, bellied on the soggy ground. A quad, picked up during an earlier retreat and converted into a truck—its driver was Sergeant Johnson—churned about the desert and dragged out trucks with its winch. Triggs, in a German Volkswagen, slithered about and guided drivers to a firmer ground.

Coming at the crucial point of the pursuit, the rain was dampening in more ways than one, and there was a certain grim humour in a [BBC](#) announcement that the New Zealand Division was racing across the desert to cut off the fleeing enemy. There was at least one man, however, who accepted it all with the philosophy of experience. Lyon spotted an English driver under his truck with a spade, and told him, 'Don't worry, soldier, we'll tow you out.' The driver looked up from the slush. 'As far as I'm concerned, sir,' he said, 'this is just another day in the army.' And went on with his work.

Further ahead the supply convoy was in a similar plight. Bracegirdle, who wanted to get ahead to report to Division, came slopping across to Quirk's truck and asked him to take him on as his car was hopelessly stuck. Quirk 'thrashed the guts' out of his vehicle, got stuck himself but was rescued by tanks, and at last came up to Rear Division. Rear Division was pervaded by an air of exasperation—'Everyone was fuming at the delay.' Units had ample reserves of rations, but petrol was short, and B echelon vehicles that had loaded up the previous day at [Alam el Halif](#) had still not returned. Quirk returned to the convoy. 'Found it hopelessly bogged. Prisoners a nuisance, and none of us with cookhouse. Terry [[Nelson](#)] went back to stay with ours some miles away. A miserable night in the bog.'

The next day, cold and bright but still gummy underfoot, the administration group converged on the landing ground. One of the first there was Quirk's replenishment convoy. With the aid of Germans and Italians the trucks were manhandled through the bog and finally came

snarling onto the airfield and set up shop at 10 a.m. The RAF took a poor view of this, and Quirk obligingly moved to one side. The RAF, however, looked at the wheel ruts and decided it might be better at **Sidi Barrani** after all.

‘People were turning up everywhere,’ Quirk recalls. Supply Company came churning through the mud and joined Quirk. **Petrol Company** sent RASC four-wheel-drive Bedfords ahead to ‘bash out’ a firm track. It pulled up about two miles short of the landing ground, where Supply Company was already in occupation.

Somehow or other most people seemed to get there, and an harassed Brigadier Crump was pleased to learn from Morris that issuing to units was under way.

As the ground dried 2 Platoon was able to go back to 208 FMC for rations. No. 4 Platoon, after issuing 7670 gallons of water, went back also, and the two returned together some time after midnight.

The fighting units, too, had pressed on during the 8th, although they were hindered by soft going. Fourth Light Armoured Brigade was sent ahead to **Sidi Barrani**; the Division, after detaching **6 Brigade**, followed up on the 9th on a course south of the main road. Because of maintenance problems beyond this point, **6 Brigade** was sent into **Matruh**, where it was supplied by 4 Platoon of Supply Company. The armour met an enemy rearguard at **Sidi Barrani**, but a reconnaissance early on the 10th showed it clear.

The ASC units followed up on the 9th along the main road. They first drove west until they encountered the **Siwa Track**, then followed this north to the road. Supply Company halted at Kilo 45, but a 5 Platoon replenishment convoy went forward to Kilo 86 during the afternoon down a road flanked by wrecked tanks and vehicles, graves and unburied bodies. Two days' battle rations—16,795—were issued to all units except those of **6 Brigade**. No. 4 Platoon, with 6 RMT transport, also came forward and issued 8184 gallons of water.

Leaving Workshops Platoon at Kilo 45 to complete repair work, the company moved on under a clear sky and warm sun on the afternoon of the 10th to Kilo 120, where 208 FMC, operating with giant 10-tonners, had now been set up. Nos. 1 and 2 Platoons between them drew 36,500 battle rations. No. 5 Platoon was sent forward to Kilo 13, beyond **Sidi Barrani**, to open a supply point. There were 'crowds of transport' on the road, but few units came for rations. It was a bad time of day for issuing—among other things it meant B echelon transport had to return to units in darkness—and closing time for future days was fixed at 10 a.m. By keeping well up, 208 FMC made this possible.



German prisoners at Tebaga Gap

German prisoners at **Tebaga Gap**



Signboard



Italian muleteers packing New Zealand rations on the Sangro front

Italian muleteers packing New Zealand rations on the Sangro front



A military policeman rings up another traffic post at the start of the Inferno-North Road tracks

A military policeman rings up another traffic post at the start of the Inferno- North Road tracks



The Inferno track to Hove Dump

The Inferno track to Hove Dump



Supply Company vehicles at the Bailey bridge in the Fabriano Gorge
Supply Company vehicles at the Bailey bridge in the Fabriano Gorge



Supply Point at Ancona
Supply Point at Ancona

As the Division prepared for the final attack of the first phase of the pursuit, it was buoyed up by a spirit of elation. News of ‘American’ landings in North- **West Africa, coupled with the brilliant success of their own efforts, put everyone ‘sky-high’.**

That night 110 men of **21 Battalion made a surprise attack on the **Halfaya** Pass position, caught a mixed German and Italian—mostly Italian—force off guard, killed many and captured 612 for the loss of two casualties, one killed, one wounded. The battle for **Egypt** was over, and the enemy was back in **Libya**.**

Camped at Kilo 13 on the road from **Sidi Barrani**, 5 Platoon heard only scattered shots, but there was some excitement in the morning when German aircraft interrupted breakfast with a bombing raid nearby.

A flood of vehicles converged on **Halfaya** Pass. Fifth Brigade, which was to continue the pursuit, was to have gone up the **Sollum** zigzag, but the road was blocked by demolitions, so the brigade wound up the barren face of **Halfaya**. The road below was choked with transport that at one stage formed a triple line reaching back an estimated seven or eight miles. At the top **5 Brigade** prepared to push on west, but the order was cancelled, and the whole Division dispersed near **Sidi Azeiz**.

Supply Company moved to **Buq Buq** and dispersed early on the morning of the 11th. Two days' battle rations were issued, bringing units back to six days' reserves plus the unconsumed portion of the day's rations. Expecting to go up the pass, the company moved forward during the afternoon, but the clutter of vehicles stretched ahead in an unbroken line. It dispersed three miles east of the **Halfaya** turn-off. Under a clear sky that night, with a new moon just showing, the men gathered round their radios and heard that French resistance had ceased in **Algiers** and that Darlan was in American hands. These were great days.

Next morning the company fell into the winding stream of traffic, crawled up the pass, and reached the replenishment area near **Capuzzo** at 10.30 a.m. Everywhere sappers were clearing away minefields. No. 2 Platoon, however, made its own way to the top. A reconnaissance showed that the **Sollum** road was open, and after being warned to keep back from the edge where a crater had been filled near the top, the platoon ascended.

Its task done for the meantime, the Division now paused and prepared for its next action.

For the next few weeks the Division remained near **Bardia**, playing football and other games, shivering in the cold—dress was still shirts

and shorts—and becoming depressed with the inactivity. Early orders for a quick move were cancelled, and the prospect of a month's training, with all the unpleasantness that implied, did not appeal. There were diversions, however, and Supply Company had more than moderate success at Rugby; it beat Headquarters Divisional Engineers 29-6 and Headquarters **6 Brigade** 17-0.

While the Division waited near **Bardia**, the enemy was being driven back across **Libya**. He fell back at last on the old **El Agheila** line, where he had defied Eighth Army before. Like the Alamein Line, the **Agheila** position had flanks protected by the sea on the north and soft sand on the south, but it was, nevertheless, a line that could be turned. It was to be the New Zealand Division's task to turn it with a 'left hook'. The code-name for the operation was **TOIL**; other phases of the plan were **BLOOD** and **SWEAT**.

On 3 December **General Freyberg** told a conference of commanders and heads of services what was known of the North African situation and how the New Zealand Division was to make an outflanking movement and contain the enemy while other units of Eighth Army applied a squeeze with a direct frontal attack. He was clearly optimistic; he instructed his officers to tell the men they would play the final of the football competition in **Tripoli**.

The Division was to make the 350-mile approach march across desert tracks, travelling via **El Adem**, **Bir Hacheim** and **Msus** to **El Haseiat**. Supply Company and **Petrol Company** were to go on ahead, replenish units as they passed near **El Adem**, load up again at **Tobruk**, and follow on. Starting with the unexpended portion plus six days' reserve rations and POL for 200 miles, the Division, with this one replenishment, should thus complete the journey with a comfortable reserve in hand.

Supply and Petrol Companies and **5 Brigade** were to move west across **Cyrenaica** on 4 December, but there was a small matter of business to attend to before this. **Major Pryde** had been given a new appointment as

commander of **2 Ammunition Company** that was being formed at **Maadi**, and Morris was to take command of Supply Company with the rank of major. **Pryde's** departure called for a suitable farewell—he had taken command on the eve of the campaign in **Greece** and had led the unit through the earliest and most difficult campaigns of the war, earning an MBE award—and Triggs was despatched with instructions to find beer. But the desert was as dry alcoholically as it was proverbially. Undismayed, Triggs went up to **Gambut**, and at the aerodrome asked to see a senior officer. He explained that Supply Company was short of beer and that its CO was leaving, and he suggested that the **RAF** might be short too. Beer could easily be had for the asking at **Matruh**, he assured the **RAF** officer, if only he could be flown there. And away went Triggs to **Matruh** in a **Wellington** bomber. Beer, however, was not to be had for the asking at **Matruh**, so on went the aircraft to **Alexandria**—also dry—**Cairo**, **Suez** and at last **Fayid**, where a supply was obtained. Back to **Gambut** went the laden bomber, and Triggs drove triumphantly into the Supply Company area in time for the farewell party on the night of 4 December.

Next morning Supply Company and **Petrol Company** moved out. With only minor complications, everything went as planned. First **5 Brigade** and then **6 Brigade** were supplied as they passed through **El Adem**, fresh supplies were loaded up at **Tobruk**, and the whole group went on its way. On the 6th Supply Company drove south towards **Bir Hacheim** through the debris of previous battles, and in welcome sunshine on the 7th rolled west along the **Msus** track—familiar to many—and on the 8th south over new country past **Saunnu** to **El Haseiat**. This part of the desert was comparatively empty; apart from thirteen burnt-out Crusaders, there were few signs of previous battles or traffic.

Preparations for the 'left hook' were begun. On this move there were no supply depots conveniently spaced along the route, and the Division and its attached groups would have to be self-sufficient in rations and water—the ration was half a gallon a day a man—for four days. Four days' battle rations and water were issued on 9 December, and on the

10th Supply Company stocked up with a further four days' rations. An issue of one day's on the 10th and 11th and two days' on the 12th kept units' reserves intact. An RASC convoy from **30 Corps** was detailed to carry a further 24,000 rations and 16,450 gallons of water for the Division to the far side of Chrystal's Rift, and Supply Company was instructed to provide an officer to guide it. Lyon was sent.

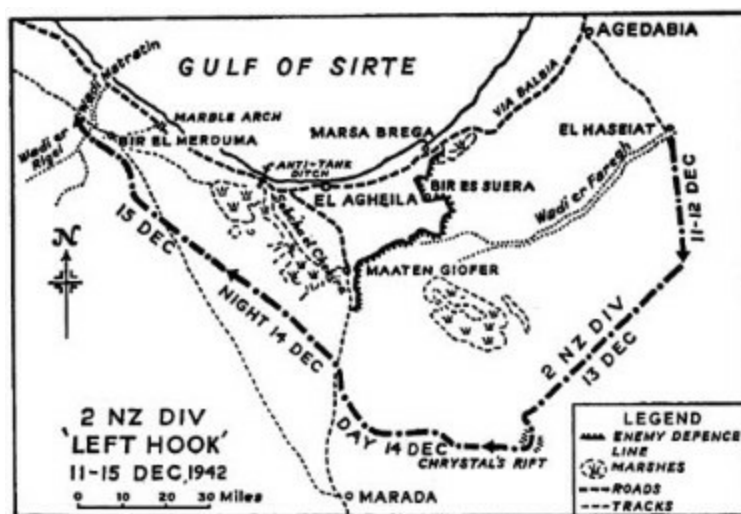
On the 11th a preliminary move—stage one of the plan—was made 30 miles to the south, and on the 12th, a day of intermittent rain, final preparations were made. From this point the Division was to move 300 miles self-sufficient in POL, and **Petrol Company** was to carry petrol for an additional 150 miles. Two vehicles from Supply and Ammunition Companies were required to help.

The exact order of march varied during the journey according to circumstances, but in general there was a screen of tanks ahead—Shermans of 4 Light Armoured Brigade—followed by the units of the Division, with **Divisional Headquarters** sandwiched in the centre and the administration group at the rear. Furthest forward in the administration group was Ammunition Company, for although ammunition was required less frequently than supplies, when there was a call it was needed in a hurry. In some formations Supply and Petrol Companies would be abreast in flank positions, but when the column was closed in Supply Company followed Ammunition Company. If an issue was to be made, B echelon transport would thus know where Supply Company was to be found. There was some complaint about the distance some vehicles had to travel back for replenishment, however, and later a new system was evolved: a jeep flying a flag was sent forward, followed by supply transport; B echelon drivers had simply to fall in behind the jeep and halt where it halted further up the column.

First away on the march were 4 Light Armoured Brigade and **6 Brigade**, which went south for 30 miles on the afternoon of the 12th. Early next day the rest of the Division began to spread its vehicles across the desert and rumble down the thrust line, marked by the **Divisional Provost Company** with black diamonds—the now familiar

diamond track. It was well into the afternoon before the last units were away; as they passed, the diamonds were lifted and replaced by petrol tins, two high and marked with the fernleaf emblem.

Lyon reported in to Supply Company Headquarters with his RASC convoy at 10 a.m. on the 13th, then moved on after the Division. The company itself moved off at 10.30 a.m., but there was a traffic hold-up, and it was not until about 3 p.m. that the company was on its way south. Rain had laid the dust, and the trucks swarmed across the firm undulating sand and gravel without the customary betraying dust cloud. They came at last onto sand, and though there were soft spots where vehicles had to drag themselves free, the damp surface packed down under the broad tires. Through Chrystal's Rift, the most treacherous obstacle on the route, the convoys closed into three columns, and vehicles lurched along through deeply rutted but firm tracks. Beyond the rift the convoys turned west and opened out again, but the broken country made it difficult to keep formation. Supply Company halted at 6 p.m. near a grave marked with an aircraft wheel. The Division had now completed stage two and was at the southernmost point of the 'left hook'.



Left Hook round El Agheila
Left Hook round [El Agheila](#)

There were rumours about that the enemy was pulling out of his [El](#)

Agheila positions. A message received that night from Headquarters **30 Corps** confirmed this and wished the Division 'good hunting', but no immediate changes of plan for the next day were made. Observing strict radio silence still, the group was to push on and seize positions overlooking the enemy's escape routes. The administration group during the operation was to consist of Ammunition, Supply and Petrol Companies, **5 Field Ambulance** less a company, **6 Field Ambulance** less a company, **Divisional Ordnance Field Park** and Divisional Workshops.

Supply Company moved up the divisional axis of advance at 8.30 a.m. on the 14th. No. 5 Platoon went ahead, and while the rest of the Division was getting itself into motion issued two days' rations—22,820—and water to quartermasters from supplies carried forward by the RASC convoy, giving units seven days' reserves and the unexpended portion of the day's ration, and leaving Supply Company with four days'. From the supply point of view, the Division could face long isolation.

This business of issuing to a mobile division in the desert was a technique that 5 Platoon had developed through long experience. Rations, loaded in bulk on the trucks, were broken out and issued directly to units without such refinements as scales for measuring things like tea and sugar; men measured by the scoopful. In earlier days this sort of thing would have been considered impossible, but the Division's constant mobile role converted an impossibility into a necessity, and despite the primitive methods and the vast quantities handled, the scheme worked well. Since only a small error with each unit would be magnified enormously in the aggregate, this says something for human judgment and adaptability.

The Division moved off beneath a heavy mist that lifted during the morning. It was a short leg to the end of stage three, just east of the **Marada** track, where the leading elements paused while the tanks and administration group closed up. Then, over broken ground, the vehicles jolted on through the darkness, crossing the **Marada** track and striking north-west on a course roughly parallel with the coast, 30 miles away. Still some miles behind, the administration group trucks were shuffling

along nose-to-tail and side to side. A loaded **Petrol Company** truck that had caught alight on the crest of a rise provided an unwelcome blazing beacon as the group moved past. The Division halted shortly after midnight, with the administration group still near **Marada** track.

Now roughly abreast of the enemy rearguard positions on the coast, the Division continued on its north-westerly course on the 15th towards Bir el Merduma, and during the morning began to brush against enemy elements. The administration group, from which Ammunition Company and **6 Field Ambulance** had been detached and which was now under the command of Major Stock, left the **Marada** track—‘an Iti road and big wire fence; only sign of civilisation for days’—and followed up. Ammunition Company's position at the head was taken by 4 and 6 RMT Companies, which moved up through Supply Company at 8 a.m.

Sixth Brigade reached a point west of Bir el Merduma during the afternoon, then turned north to cut the coast road. Fifth Brigade was to follow up and fall in on a flank. The rest of the Division reached the area west of Bir el Merduma in the early evening, and the administration group rolled up at 6 p.m. and dispersed six or seven miles to the south-east of Divisional Headquarters. Towards the end of the march X Water Issue Section and 4 Platoon 6 RMT lost contact with Supply Company, and as the company did not park on the divisional axis the lost trucks missed it and drove on to Rear Division.

Fifth Brigade was late in arriving, and instead of following up **6 Brigade** was ordered to halt and take up positions facing east.

Although the position at the moment was not clear, it was known that substantial enemy forces were wedged between **7 Armoured Division** to the east and the New Zealand Division to the west. Some hours later it was learned that **21 Panzer Division** and **90 Light Division** were believed to be in the trap, and probably **15 Panzer Division**. This was clearly no place for soft-skinned transport, and fairly early in the evening of 15 December it was decided to send the administration group back down the divisional axis of advance. Supply Company men had

barely turned in when orders came at 9 p.m. to retire 10 miles. They rolled out of their blankets and 'milled around' until about midnight, when the moon appeared. In the new positions guards were posted and the rest of the men curled up again for some sleep. But they were not left long in peace.

At 12.10 a.m. 4 Light Armoured Brigade reported encountering tanks that were moving south-west and which would endanger the administration group. At 4 a.m. orders for a further 10-mile withdrawal were received by Supply Company, and it was dawn—a beautiful rose-pink dawn, though few probably cared to notice it—as the vehicles rolled into the new area and parked. Artillery fire could be heard not far away.

The decisive hour had come, but it was a sad disappointment; the outflanking force was too small, and though the 'left hook' may have hurried the enemy along, as a tactical move to cut off the enemy it was a fizzer. While *90 Light Division* had prevented **6 Brigade** from reaching the road, *21 Panzer Division* had escaped along it during the night. Further inland *15 Panzer Division* bumped into New Zealand elements in the morning, swung a little to the north and ducked through an unintended gap between 5 and 6 Brigades, suffering relatively lightly.

The enemy now fell back to **Nofilia**, and on the 17th the New Zealand Division followed up with another 'left hook'. Profiting by experience, Major Stock issued a general instruction to the administration group on the 16th that incorporated a plan for a swift retirement: if the group was required to 'move urgently for safety's sake' the code word **SWORDFISH** would be given, followed by a direction to be taken by the head of the column along the divisional axis.

It was a cold, wet, grey day as the trucks swarmed across the rolling, scrub-covered country on the 17th. Late in the morning the **Royal Scots Greys** and Divisional Cavalry bumped into German elements near **Nofilia**. Fifth Brigade, coming up behind, moved past to the south, then swung north and jabbed at the road, along which German columns were streaming.

Further back, shells dropped into New Zealand units moving up, and the order went back to the administration group to turn about. No order was ever obeyed with more alacrity. Some Supply Column men saw an airburst smudged against the cloud up ahead, and the next moment vehicles came roaring back towards them. The ' **El Agheila Derby**', as it became known, was on. As the trucks pelted by, others turned and followed, and soon the whole group was headed back down the divisional axis. Sixteen miles back a halt was called. Later in the day a small party of German prisoners was brought back. Like others caught at this stage, their morale was high, and they were emphatic that they would not leave **Africa**.

Petrol reserves were now wearing thin. Having already covered 350 miles—fifty more than the distance allowed for when petrol was drawn at Haseiat—Supply Company now held sufficient for only 50 miles a vehicle, and a despatch rider was sent to inform Command NZASC of the situation. The ration situation was better. Units still carried four days' plus the unexpended portion, and Supply Company carried another four days' rations.

Attacking with spirit, **5 Brigade** made an effort to get astride the road, but ran into soft sand and a determined flank guard. The fight went on into the night. Then in the darkness the Germans slipped away, and once again Rommel evaded his pursuers. The New Zealand Division had gone to the limit of its resources and was now forced to halt.

Petrol reached the Division on 18 December, and with fighters droning overhead the administration group moved up to rejoin the rest of the units. A warning order for a further westward advance was issued, then cancelled. The Division settled down at **Nofilia**.

There was time now to think about such luxuries as Christmas festivities; there was time to think and relax a little. The New Zealanders were still in a forward position and were covering the road, but the enemy appeared to be high-tailing back to **Sirte**, 80 miles away, and was in no condition to bounce back. At all events, no move was

anticipated for ten days, and football fields were formed and a training programme begun.

But the main thought for the moment was Christmas, the third some men had spent away from home and the second the Division had celebrated in the desert. For ASC units, including Supply Company, it was the third Christmas in the desert: the first was at **Fuka**, during Wavell's campaign, and the second also at **Fuka** after the second Libyan campaign, though some sections were still in **Libya** then. It had been shown on these occasions that sufficient will power and organisation could overcome the handicaps of an arid desert, but this time things were rather different; the Division was 1200 miles west of the Delta—the width of the Tasman—it was in the front line, and it was actively preparing to pursue a dangerous enemy. The Naafi, Eighth Army supply lines and Supply Company overcame these difficulties.

On 19 December Lyon was sent away with a convoy of thirty-five vehicles to **El Adem**, 600 miles back, where he would meet a similar convoy from the Delta region carrying 19,200 bottles of beer, ten loads of mail and 12,000 Patriotic parcels; however, he was not due back until 29 December, and supplies for Christmas—beer, rum and pork, together with whatever else units bought with their funds—came through other supply channels in time for Christmas. Christmas mail, including 60,000 parcels, was brought up from **El Agheila**. Lyon's convoy was used by **General Freyberg** when he visited NZASC Headquarters on Christmas Eve as an illustration of the supply problems now facing the Division; to bring three tons of beer from the Delta, he said, it required two tons of petrol. The General thanked the NZASC units for nursing their vehicles through the campaign, and asked them for even greater efforts in future operations.

Probably no Christmas gift was more welcome than the fresh bread that reached the troops in time for Christmas dinner. Formed on 1 December, NZ Field Bakery left **Maadi** on the 9th and reached the area west of **Marble Arch** ten days later. It baked for the first time on the 23rd and issued to Supply Company for a Christmas issue. On 26

December the bakery moved into Supply Company's area, and in future operations was usually found close to the company, which of course made the issue of 5000 lb. a day. The bakery's 'patrons' later included the Army Commander, General Montgomery, and during the preparations for the **Mareth** 'left hook', when daylight movement was forbidden, the only vehicle seen abroad in daylight in the Supply Company area was the Army Commander's truck, which called daily for his bread.

Christmas Day was fine and clear, one of those peerless, blue **Mediterranean** days when the dazzling white shore sets off the hues of sea and sky. A Protestant service was conducted in the Supply Company lines by Padre Holland near the water's edge, and Roman Catholics knelt among the low, green shrubs near 5 ADS. Father **Forsman**¹ officiated. Then there was a day of eating, drinking and visiting, a day of conviviality and relaxation—a day of nostalgic memories.

But it was a brief Christmas—one day. No time for Boxing Day, no time for any other day, for there was serious work to be done. Everywhere there was activity. Sappers swarmed across the countryside flanking the roads sweeping with their 'Hoovers'—mine detectors—and probing with their bayonets. Transport aircraft and fighters of the Desert Air Force crowded the airfield near **Marble Arch**. Motor transport hummed back and forth along the road and around the many detours. For Supply Company, in addition to the mundane daily round of drawing from 108 FMC, east of **Marble Arch**, and issuing to the Division, there was an administrative build-up to attend to for the next phase of the campaign. The reserve to be achieved was eleven days' rations and water—seven days' with first-line transport and four with second-line transport. **Petrol Company** had to lay up petrol for 350 miles.

Supply Company had got to work after the **El Agheila** 'left hook' activities had ceased on 19 December, issuing four days' rations; this brought units up to six days' and the unexpended portion. On the 20th Roberts took the first convoy back past **Marble Arch** to 108 FMC. The

administration group was disbanded at midnight on 19–20 December, and units returned to individual command.

On 21 December Supply Company moved to the beach. It drove back 15 miles, then turned north across rough ground, passing **Nofilia**, a small village pierced by a white minaret and backed by a medieval-style Italian fort of turrets, bastions—and a radio mast. Camped on the coast, Supply Company men were fortunate; petrol now was precious, and transport to carry men of some units to the beach was strictly controlled. The sea was cold and swimming not over-popular, but it did provide a bath.

Except on Christmas Day, the work of drawing and issuing went on daily, though there was time for Rugby; still unbeaten, Supply Company beat **Divisional Signals** on 28 December 5-0. There was an echo of Christmas on the 29th when Lyon's beer convoy came home from **El Adem**; he brought also 12,000 Patriotic parcels, 12,160 tins of New Zealand tobacco, 600,000 New Zealand cigarettes, 171,000 South African cigarettes, and other stores from **Maadi**. Next day there was a free issue to each man of the Division of one Patriotic parcel, a tin of tobacco, fifty New Zealand and fourteen South African cigarettes. The beer was sold to units, and other goods were distributed through canteens.

New Year's Day 1943 was the Division's last in North Africa. There had been other New Years when Eighth Army had been reaching forward to a victory that always proved an illusion. But this time the victory was real and decisive, and ahead lay **Tripoli**, so long sought by the British, so long jealously held by the enemy, a prize in which the Italians, whose colony this was, placed great store. **Tripoli** was a symbol—of achievement for Eighth Army, of defeat for the enemy. The men whose good fortune it was to take it approached it with a sense of excitement. In faraway prison camps, less lucky soldiers waited for the news of its fall with an oft-repeated admonition, 'Roll on Eighth Army'.

And in the New Year Eighth Army was preparing to roll on, for

Tripoli, whatever its symbolical value, had a very real military value too. Its possession by the enemy gave him short lines of communication; its possession by the British forces, relying now on battered **Benghazi** and the long land link to **Tobruk**, would provide a valuable port and force the enemy to reach further back for his supplies.

The enemy was now holding a line running inland from just west of **Buerat**, but it was thought unlikely that he would stay to fight. His resources were wearing thin, and urgently needed reinforcements were being drawn off to **Tunisia** to meet **First Army's** threat from the west. Eighth Army was to repeat the **El Agheila** formula, thrusting along the coast and sending the New Zealand Division, together with Shermans of the **Royal Scots Greys**, along an inland route to perform yet another 'left hook'. The requirements of the administrative build-up would not permit an attack before 14 January.

There was just time for one more indulgence, a seven-a-side Rugby tournament on 1 January, won among jubilation by the redoubtable Supply Company team, and the New Zealanders turned to more serious things. Fifth Brigade, with one sergeant and six men from Supply Company for supply work, moved 60 miles west to clear a landing ground near **Wadi Tamet**. On 3 and 4 January the rest of the Division left its **Nofilia** positions and in a blinding dust-storm moved out into the open desert. It was a miserable two days; dust or no dust, Supply Company had to carry out a minor dumping programme at the new location, and on the 4th—while grit filled ears, eyes and mouth—it had to dismantle its camp, pack and move. In addition to the discomforts there were still hazards: thermos bombs were lying about, and there were still undetected mines; a truck was blown up at 108 FMC on the 3rd not far from a Supply Company convoy.

The administration group excepted, the Division made a preliminary 41-mile move on 9 January as an exercise. Then on the 10th, with a bitterly cold wind whipping up the dust, the whole group moved forward to join **5 Brigade** near **Wadi Tamet**.

The first part of the advance was in the nature of an approach march on a rather grander scale than that for the second Libyan campaign fourteen months earlier. By 14 January the New Zealand Division, together with **7 Armoured Division**, was to be ready on the enemy's southern flank, and as the attack was made along the coast by **51 (Highland) Division**, New Zealand Division and the armour was to strike inland.

For this approach march an intricate system of supplies had been worked out. When the move began, Supply Company had built up ration requirements; units carried seven days' reserves, plus the unexpended portion, and three and a half gallons of water for each man. Supply Company itself carried three days' rations, one day's bread and a day's water. No. 4 Platoon 6 RMT, attached, was to carry the water. Field Bakery was also attached for the purposes of the move.

Over the first stages of the advance Supply Company operated a leapfrog system. Triggs' 4 Platoon established a dump of two days' rations—based on a strength of 13,500, including the Greys and **5 Brigade**—near the site of the first day's bivouac—10–11 January—while Quirk's 5 Platoon remained behind to pick up rations missed the previous day. X Water Issue Section had already moved up on 9 January and constructed a filling point at **Gasr Bu Hadi**. On the 11th there was a pause. From Triggs' dump, one mile to the south, 25,609 rations were issued. **Irvine**² took 2 Platoon ahead across **Wadi Tamet** and formed another dump for two days at the site of the next camp. Water tankers filled up at **Gasr Bu Hadi**. To watch Irvine's dump, 5 Platoon provided a guard.

Two administration groups were organised on 11 January, Supply, Petrol and Ammunition Companies being included in the first, which was to tag along behind **5 Brigade**, the rearmost fighting formation of the Division.

With a nagging wind blowing up clouds of dust, the Division filed into **Wadi Tamet** on the 12th and jolted along the track prepared by the

engineers and marked with the diamond sign by the provosts. The day's move carried the Division forward 38 miles. As they halted, vehicles turned north to reduce shadow and prevent reflection from the windscreens, and camouflage nets were drawn across them. While the Division had moved forward, other vehicles moved back down the axis, among them a Supply Company convoy under Quirk and Irvine. At 110 FMC they picked up a day's rations, water, and flour for the Field Bakery, and rejoined the unit next day. Water was drawn from **Gasr Bu Hadi**.

During the daylight hours of the 13th—still cold and dusty—the Division remained stationary. Two days' rations and one and a half gallons of water a man were drawn from the dump three and a half miles west of Divisional Headquarters. In the late afternoon most of the Division moved on and continued its move into the night. The administration groups followed up on the morning of the 14th, again a dirty, dusty day. Irvine came up from 110 FMC, and Supply Company now held rations and water. Supply preparations were now complete. No further rations were drawn until **Tripoli** was reached, and there were no further issues for four days. Now, close to the southern flank of the enemy line, the Division was stocked up for the thrust on **Tripoli**.

There were signs that things were stirring. Throughout the afternoon and evening the rumble of bombing and gunfire came from the northwest, and flares could be seen. During the night of 14–15 January the New Zealand Division and **7 Armoured Division** crossed the **Gheddahia-Bu Ngem** track and began to probe forward, and at daylight spread out into desert formation. Soon the forward armoured columns ran into shelling; there was a skirmish between tanks, and that night the enemy fell back. Pressing on in daylight on 16 December, the divisions crossed **Wadi Zemzem** and swung towards the north on a course roughly parallel with the coast. Without encountering any appreciable resistance, the force rolled on on the 17th, swinging to the west again at Wadi Merdum and striking in the direction of **Beni Ulid**. On the night of 17–18 January it received instructions to advance on **Tarhuna** with the object of

outflanking the enemy force stubbornly resisting on the coast.

Behind the Army came the Air Force, its transport swarming onto landing grounds and its aircraft reaching overhead to strike at enemy troops and at **Tripoli. But within all this ceaseless activity Supply Company had a dull time bouncing over rough, dusty going, hearing distant sounds of battle, but seeing little else beyond lines of rolling transport. In the war diary it looked like this:**

15: Coy moved to new area **Misurata 1/500,000 XA5862. No issue. No draw. Big barrage NW.**

16: A1 order to move X4262. Pockets of enemy west and south. Main body north west. No issue. No refill.

17: Sitrep shows capture or destruction of six tanks—prisoners. Move on 12 vehicle front to area 16 miles south east **Sedada. No issue. No refill.**

What those official entries meant in more descriptive terms is shown by Quirk's diary:

15 January (Friday): Move off at 0930. A slow day of much waiting in which we covered about 30 miles, mostly north of west. Parked for night close to 6 MDS. Occasional rumble of gunfire close by. Much aerial activity (ours). Grand fighter sweeps. Heavy artillery barrage during the night.

16 January: Moved again 0930. A long, slow day of stops and starts in which we covered only 21 miles, stopping eventually at 1630 hours.... Rolling country, scrub and dust. Coy travelling five lanes 150 yards between vehicles.

17 January: Fine, clear chilly day. Away again at 1000 hours. Very cold last night. Another very boring and uninteresting day of long halts. We covered only 25 miles over good rolling country, rocky hills. In Wadi Zem Zem saw some stunted trees and green bramble, a change for the

eye. Air Force again in prominence. Transports going over us. Camped for night in wadi with green bramble bushes. Brilliant moonlight so we strolled over the hills. Intensely cold in bed.

While the leading units of the New Zealand Division some 30 miles ahead edged up to the **Beni Ulid** road on the 18th and paused some miles to the east of the village, the administration group followed in its own time. Setting off in the morning, it wound down a narrow defile into the **Sedada** wadi, a pleasant place of trees and green grass, and a few ruins. But there were mines about—one truck went up in a cloud of dust not far from Supply Company—and wrecked Italian tanks showed that the enemy had passed this way. After clearing the wadi the group clapped on the pace and went haring after the Division in a vast cloud of dust—or so it was imagined. Actually, the leaders had gone astray where the New Zealand Division and **7 Armoured Division** axes of advance diverged in the wadi, and most of the supply vehicles were on the heels of the tanks. In the confusion, Supply Company became divided, but pieced itself together on the 19th, when the wayward trucks retraced their steps—they had finished up on the wrong side of a wadi—and came up the divisional axis.

On the 19th there was a pause. The road was heavily mined and **Beni Ulid**, in precipitous country, presented an embarrassing bottleneck for such a huge force awheel. The ASC grasped the chance to set up a supply point at the rear of **5 Brigade**, and Supply Company made its only issue during the advance: two days' rations gave units supplies to 24 January. Water was also issued on this and subsequent days.

In brilliant moonlight on the night of 19–20 January the Division streamed through **Beni Ulid** and at daybreak was dispersed 30 to 40 miles south-east of **Tarhuna**, which lay among hills. The road ahead was badly damaged by demolitions. Supply Company followed up with the first administration group on the morning of 20 January. Progress was slow to the **Beni Ulid** road. There were mines everywhere, and a litter of dead natives, shot-up enemy trucks and Italian tanks. It was a dusty journey of many stops, and when darkness came the moon was concealed by

cloud. The trucks ground through **Beni Ulid** and down through the pitch blackness of a defile beyond, and emerged at length onto the **Tarhuna** road. Supply Company halted at the 60-kilometre peg at 9.30 p.m. Here some English troops attached walked on a mine; two were killed and four wounded.

X Water Issue Section spent the 20th searching for a suitable water supply. Some small wells found were inadequate for pumping, but in **Beni Ulid** others were found which, although slow, served the purpose. Water issues were made on the 21st, 22nd and 23rd, and on the 23rd the two water-carrying platoons—3 Platoon and 4 Platoon 6 RMT—returned to Supply Company with a full load of water.

Ahead, reconnaissance detachments had found a track, bulldozers scooped out some sort of a road, and on the 21st the Division squeezed through in slow single file. The rearmost vehicles, which of course included Supply Company, edged along inch by inch and did not emerge onto the coastal plain until the 22nd. Quirk and **Nelson** went on ahead on the 22nd with bread and mail for units—a ‘door-to-door’ delivery. Their convoy ran past Italian settlements of stone houses and climbed up into the hills and along the newly made road— ‘Going terrible. Soft sand and steep wadis.’—and down onto the plain to B echelon detachments.

Fifth Brigade and the Greys, meanwhile, had reached the **Garian** road and had turned north towards **Tripoli**. South of **Azizia** they met **15 Panzer Division**, and for a while exchanged shells. A brilliant display of tracer on the night of 22–23 January dissuaded **5 Brigade** from pushing through, but in the morning the road was clear.

On 23 January Eighth Army converged on **Tripoli** from three directions. The operation was completed on schedule.

‘Trees and grass and orchards. Blossom and the smell of bluegum. Neat Italian settlements, white stone houses. Railway (shot up). Lay in the grass, threw off our clothes and bathed in the open. Water from

irrigation taps. Wells everywhere.'

This cryptic diary note dated 24 January reflects the sublime contentment with which the New Zealanders looked about them on the morrow of the capture of **Tripoli**. Camps were among rows of olive and almond trees, and anyone who had cause to make a run back down the coast saw green, cultivated country. **Tripoli** itself offered none of the civilised comforts of **Cairo**—restaurants were empty of food and shops boarded up—but it was a pleasant, clean city of white-walled buildings and broad streets flanked by palms.

It was a good place to rest at the end of a long, dusty desert advance, and whatever its deficiencies it had opportunities to offer; he is a poor soldier who cannot turn the most unpromising situation to some advantage. For Supply Company men, with readily available transport and their roving role, **Tripoli's** particular benefit was an apparently inexhaustible supply of radio sets. Italian civilians were instructed to hand in their sets, and Supply Company men, seeing an Italian trundling his radio through the streets, would make an offer. Anticipating that they would never see their sets again anyway, the Italians were ready to make a deal. Soon there were few trucks in the company without a radio, and company workshops were kept busy converting them to operate on direct current.

From **Tripoli**, too, came the materials for the conversion of the orderly-room truck into one of the most opulent orderly rooms in the British Army. It is described as being 'the ultimate in cliftie'. From the stores department of the equivalent of the city council came plywood panelling for the walls; from the council offices came steel filing cabinets; and from various other places odds and ends to complete the job. In this sophisticated splendour, such plebeian pastimes as brewing up and toasting over a primus seemed hardly in place, but they persisted, none the less, despite protests from Morris.

Supply Company settled in near **Castel Benito**, south of **Tripoli** on the **Tarhuna** road. Fifth Brigade was in **Tripoli** itself as New Zealand's

visible contribution to the occupation, and **6 Brigade** was at **Bianchi**, south-west of **Tripoli**. With the Division now static, supply work became routine again, but Supply Company trucks were involved in the vast operation of ferrying cargoes from lighters in **Tripoli** harbour—being worked by New Zealand labour—to depots in and around the city. A good proportion of the Division's transport was engaged in this task, which called for strict traffic control to avoid congestion in the dock area. For although the enemy had been well pummelled, he was still very full of life and frequently sent his aircraft over to harass the work.

And there were other hazards beside enemy aircraft. Naturally in **Tripoli** there was a fair infestation of what Americans like to call 'top brass', and at any given moment a high ranking officer was likely to be abroad on the road. While driving an officer into **Tripoli** one day, Driver Sleeman ³ very wrongly attempted to pass a small convoy when a motor cycle approaching from the opposite direction forced him to cut in. He was in **Tripoli** for a second time that afternoon when an officer 'all red tabs and badges' stopped by his truck and demanded, 'Are you the man who nearly crashed the Army Commander's car this morning?' Sleeman couldn't be sure about that, but he conceded that he had cut into a convoy, and was informed that he had cut across the nose of General Montgomery's staff car—'You nearly killed him.' Sleeman was put on charge, but if Field Marshal Lord Montgomery recalls the incident he might be interested to know that three 'mistakes' were found in the charge, which was in consequence dismissed.

The most notable event of the **Tripoli** occupation was the visit of **Mr Churchill** on 4 February, a calm, clear day on which the green grass of the parade ground and the flanking bluegums basked in the sun. Seven officers and 200 men of Supply Company fell in with a services group and took up their place in the long khaki lines, and at 2 p.m. **Mr. Churchill's** open car, in which was also seated the familiar figure of General Montgomery, with black beret, rolled onto the parade ground. Behind, in a German staff car, came General Sir Harold Alexander and General Sir Alan Brooke, and in following cars Lieutenant-General Sir

Oliver Leese and various other senior officers. Mr **Churchill** drove along the lines of troops, then from the saluting base told them that they would 'march into fairer lands...where the grim and severe conditions of the desert lie behind.' He dispelled any hopes that this fairer land might be New Zealand, however, by reporting that the **New Zealand Government**, in secret session, 'accorded to you what is, I am sure, your wish to see this particular job through to the end.' Of this particular job he said:

[The enemy] is coming towards the end of his means of retreat, and in the corner of **Tunisia** a decisive battle has soon to be fought. Other great forces are coming in from the west.... All these forces are closing in and all these operations are combined, but in them, I am sure, the Desert Army and the New Zealand Division will bear a most recognisable and honourable part.

Then, in lines of nine abreast, the formations marched past. Armoured and artillery units marched onto a vehicle park, and the tanks, guns and vehicles fell in again behind the marching troops.

Several days later General Montgomery had a word or two to say himself when he addressed officers of Eighth Army in the Miramare Theatre, **Tripoli**. Speaking of the three divisions that had fought their way up to **Tripoli** from **Alamein**—7 Armoured, 51 (Highland) and 2 New Zealand—he said, 'Nowhere in any army in the world are there three such divisions as these.' Eighth Army would go forward into **Tunisia** with the support of 300 fighter aircraft, 300 bombers and 600 tanks. Rommel had a bad attack of the jitters, said General Montgomery. 'That man is rattled.'

And so Eighth Army got ready for the next move. There was still time for Rugby: Supply Company played interplatoon games; the company on 21 February, playing under the eyes of the ASC selectors, beat **Petrol Company** 6-3; and **28 (Maori) Battalion** won the divisional competition. But the spell in **Tripoli** was drawing to an end. On 24 February Major Bracegirdle instructed Supply Company to begin building

up supplies, and as the transport became available, the work was done. On 1 March the order came: 'The Company will move west to **Ben Gardane** 2 March 43 in rear of 1 NZ Ammunition Coy.'

While the New Zealanders had been at **Tripoli**, other units of Eighth Army had been chasing the Axis forces back towards the **Mareth Line**, which formed a taut barrier between mountains and the sea. The enemy was now in a tight spot— **First Army** was applying pressure from the west, and the area left to him was narrowing—but he still had vim for a counter-attack. Eighth Army was not concentrated to meet such an attack, and the New Zealand Division was called up to assist.

It was all done in haste and with the frenzied activity that goes with an emergency move. Fifth Brigade had its orders early on 1 March, but not until later in the day was it known that the complete Division would be moving. A normal one-day ration issue had been made that morning, and this was followed by a six-day issue to most units; some had already received three days' the previous day, and these received a further four. Fifth Brigade was packed off that night with 1 Platoon of Supply Company, commanded by Rawle, in attendance. Rawle's platoon carried four days' rations. The rest of the company loaded up with four days' reserves for the remaining units, and at 8 p.m. was ready, with laden trucks, to move on an hour's notice. Some 6 RMT vehicles were assisting with the load-carrying.

Sixth Brigade moved off on the morning of the 2nd, and the rest of the Division trailed along behind during the afternoon and evening. With headlights dimmed, Supply Company fell into the chain early in the evening; the route was north to the coast road, then west. The glowing, growling line of vehicles was apparently of no interest to enemy aircraft at that moment bombing **Tripoli**. The convoy moved west through the bitterly cold night until the dawn glinted on the salt lakes flanking either side of the road. At daybreak the company streamed through Pisida and soon after halted short of the Tunisian frontier for a welcome breakfast. Then, with a benign winter sun shining from a clear sky, the vehicles moved on along the good Italian-made highway. But

progress was slower. Transport and tanks cluttered the road, and it was not until late morning that the company crossed the border. There was immediate transformation: on the Italian side the land was well kept and cultivated and trees turned roads into pleasant avenues; on the French side the land turned to desert, and the road became a narrow, bumpy strip. Burnt-out vehicles, minefields and demolitions marked the route.

Ben Gardane was a small native village, with shelter-like buildings showing, in their grilled windows, a Moorish influence. Seventeen miles further along the road the company halted at 3 p.m. after being twenty hours on the road. Already the two infantry brigades were in position at **Medenine**, 27 miles up the road, and ready for action.

While the infantry busily strengthened their positions at **Medenine**, Supply Company went back into the old routine of drawing—from **Ben Gardane**—and issuing—at a replenishment area 19 kilometres east of **Medenine**. There seemed to be tanks everywhere as replenishment convoys moved back and forth along the narrow strip of tarseal. Burnt-out and wrecked vehicles were littered about, craters pitted the ground, and here and there were graves. Then, on the morning of 6 March, gunfire rumbled in the east. To Supply Company came an order to detach two platoons—Nos. 2 and 3 were sent—to carry ammunition from 115 FMC at **Ben Gardane** to 116 FMC at **Medenine**.

Early that morning, while white mist smothered the front, enemy guns had begun to bark, and an enemy thrust converged on the **Medenine** junction. Shrewd defensive planning drew the panzers into a hornets' nest of anti-tank guns, and 25-pounders lashed the following infantry. Stukas screamed down on the road near Supply Company early in the afternoon, and at 6 p.m. the storm burst over the company and some nearby 8th Reinforcements who had just arrived. As dusk was gathering a group of aircraft came skimming in low; a momentary thought that they were **RAF** aircraft playing games was dispelled as tearing machineguns sprayed out tracer, and there was a scatter for cover. For some minutes ten light bombers raced about with malicious

glee, and then flew off with two petrol dumps flaring behind them. It was a parting shot; the counterattack had failed, and the enemy ground forces withdrew behind the **Mareth Line**.

¹ **Rev Fr E. A. Forsman; Auckland; born Auckland, 20 Mar 1909; Roman Catholic priest.**

² **Capt L. F. Irvine; Te Awamutu; born NZ, 6 Mar 1911; auctioneer.**

³ **Dvr R. G. Sleemen; Invercargill; born Paekakariki, 11 Jul 1913; carpenter.**

SUPPLY COMPANY

CHAPTER 11 – TUNISIA

CHAPTER 11

Tunisia

As at **Alamein** after the **Alam Halfa** battle, Eighth Army was now free to turn its energies to its own offensive plan, code-named **PUGILIST**. This was yet another 'left hook', but on a grander scale. While British units made a frontal attack, **New Zealand Corps**, consisting of **2 New Zealand Division**, **8 Armoured Brigade**, King's Dragoon Guards, British artillery regiments and a Free French force under General Leclerc, was to make the sweep to the west and drive through the **Tebaga Gap** to **Gabes** and **Sfax**.

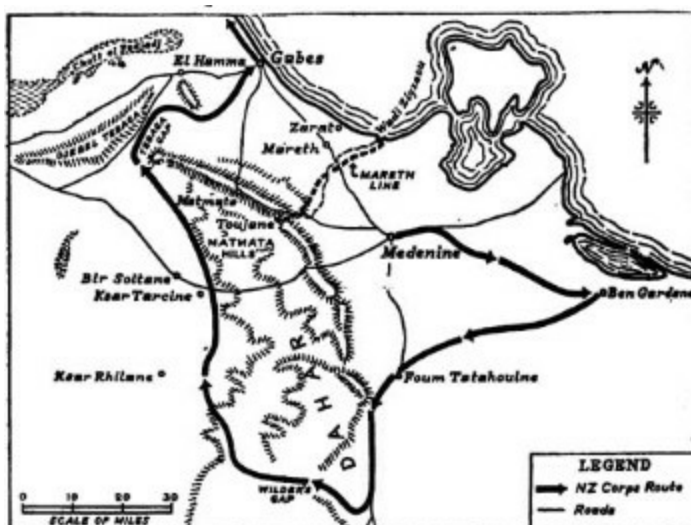
Here again the New Zealand Division was to be involved in an extended march that would take it far from normal supply lines, but it was an operation of entirely different character from the previous 'left hooks'. In earlier operations the Division had been sent hell-for-leather around a flank with the assignment of catching an unsuspecting enemy in the rear; in this operation no such surprise appearance was possible as the enemy had a line plugging the **Tebaga Gap**, through which the Division must pass. So before it could threaten the enemy's rear it had first to break through a defence line, a task that did not permit nicely computed schedules with administrative arrangements to match.

And so there was necessarily an administrative change, too. At **El Agheila** the line-of-communication problem had been solved by decapitation: the Division had been lopped off from the head and left to its own devices. At **Mareth** the solution was attenuation: the supply line was stretched along the axis of advance, and ASC units were able to restock. Thus, however long the New Zealand Division took to break the **Tebaga** line, it could depend on a steady flow of supplies from the rear.

But there was another significant feature of the arrangements that may not have been evident when it was first planned. During the assault on **Mareth**, General Montgomery found it expedient to switch his main thrust from a direct frontal attack to a flank attack via **Tebaga**. He was

able to divert an entirely unprepared **10 Corps** for this task; without administrative build-up, it was able to make the long desert journey and, on arrival, take over a well stocked and fully operating FMC, completed with an established line from the rear.

The supply organisation for the entire **New Zealand Corps** was handled by NZASC units augmented by British army troops companies. This had been decided as far back as 27 February, when a conference at **Tripoli** had agreed on how a New Zealand FMC for the **Mareth** 'left hook' should be set up. Headquarters 4 RMT Company was to supply the staff for the FMC headquarters; Ammunition, Petrol and Supply Companies were each to detach groups to attend to their own commodities; and Headquarters 6 RMT Company was to provide a detachment for liaison with the Army roadhead at **Nalut**, to be staffed by Army. Supply Company's task was to lay in 672 tons of supplies, including 336,000 rations and 72,000 lb. of flour for Field Bakery.



Left Hook at Mareth
Left Hook at **Mareth**

The FMC was to be at **Bir Amir**, some 30 miles to the south of **Foum Tatahouine**, and on 12 March a reconnaissance party went down to look things over. Quirk, whose 5 Platoon had come as far as a staging area east of **Foum Tatahouine**, accompanied the party to look over the country in which he had to conceal from the enemy's prying eyes a substantial depot of supplies. He found **Foum Tatahouine** a 'nice place,

pleasant clean barracks'.

Peculiar rock formation of the country. Admirable for defence, and pill boxes and gun positions could be seen. This was an outpost of the **Mareth** defences. Turned off west into the hills and desert 20 miles south of **Foum Tatahouine**. A Fighting Free French column went past up in clouds of dust. Supposed to be no movement by day. A Hun recce was over and took due note. Decided on site for FMC and spent night near well at **Bir Amir**.

During the night 5 Platoon came in, and **5 Brigade**, moving up under cover of darkness, roared by. Next morning Quirk went the rounds of his 'farm' and began laying out sites for dumps. That day the rest of Supply Company, less 4 Platoon, which was left to complete supply work in the old area, moved back through **Ben Gardane** to the staging area. Shoulder titles and hat badges had been removed, and fernleaf emblems on vehicles painted over. After replenishing with water and petrol at the staging area, the company pushed on through **Foum Tatahouine** and down through the rough desert tracks to **Bir Amir**, reached at 4 a.m. It dumped 31,000 rations and 32,000 gallons of water, and next evening 1, 2 and 3 Platoons and 3 Platoon 6 RMT attached set off for the roadhead, which had been moved forward from **Nalut** to El Dehibat, 80 miles to the west.

So began a vast movement forward of supplies right under the enemy's nose. The approach route to the FMC was under his observation, and in darkness and without lights, the entire second and third-line transport of the New Zealand Division and three general transport companies—about 600 vehicles—had to move up to **Bir Amir**, unload and get away before daylight. Daylight hours were employed moving back to the roadhead, loading and moving forward as far as was permissible. Then, in the dusty darkness, they surged forward again with no pretence at convoy discipline—none was possible—but with a skill that avoided serious accidents. A ten-chain-wide tire-churned track across the sand marked the route, and the enemy must have wondered a great deal. But

he saw no movement, and drivers were instructed that if they were caught in enemy observed territory twenty minutes from dawn they were to disperse and camouflage their vehicles. Notices along the track warned, 'You are under enemy observation at this point.'

There was little or no time for sleep. There were two drivers to each truck, and some men nodded while their companions drove; others managed to snatch an hour or so while their trucks were stationary.

Tanks moving up on the night of 16–17 March added to the general stampede of traffic, and a heavy dust-storm during the 17th covered the area with swirling, choking clouds. And for good measure Arabs were pillaging lamps from the divisional axis and laying mines along the track. In the midst of it all the Division and **8 Armoured Brigade** had to be replenished.

In these conditions two huge lifts carried forward 6000 tons of ammunition, POL and supplies to the New Zealand FMC; by 17 March the roadhead was clear, and deliveries were completed that night. By the 18th the FMC was fully stocked.

A visitor during the 17th was a supply officer from General Leclerc's L Force, but the Frenchmen were not seeking very much in the way of supplies, fortunately, as their requirements would have been very different from those of British units. L Force, accustomed to moving long distances as a self-contained unit, carried with it POL for 500 miles and supplies and rations for a month or more.

The **New Zealand Corps**, meanwhile, had been gathering in secret in an area to the west of the FMC beyond Wilder's Gap, and to prevent enemy ground observation L Force was maintaining patrols to the north and north-west of **Ksar Rhilane**. Beneath dust and rain, the Corps waited for the start signal. There were three distinct groups in the plan of battle: **30 Corps** was to drive the enemy back onto the **Mareth Line** proper, punch a hole through the defences and pass through and capture **Gabes**; **10 Corps**, in reserve, was to protect **30 Corps'** left flank and rear

and exploit success towards **Gabes and Sfax**; **New Zealand Corps**, of course, was to make a turning movement around the enemy's right flank. **New Zealand Corps** was to move off at 7 p.m. on the night of 19–20 March and drive without halting to a staging area east of **Ksar Rhilane**. Leaving Rear **New Zealand Corps** and the administration group here, the Corps was then to press on next night for 40 miles. French forces, meanwhile, were to capture and establish firm bases at **Bir Soltane**, past which the Corps would move during the night. From the second staging area the armour—Divisional Cavalry and **8 Armoured Brigade**—would probe forward into the enemy's eastern defences in the **Tebaga Gap**.

First-line units were to start the movement carrying six days' rations and water and as much petrol as possible, with a minimum for 300 miles. Second-line vehicles were to carry four days' rations and water and petrol for 100 miles. As soon as the Corps reached the first night's laager, a replenishment area was to be opened, and one day's rations and water and petrol for topping up were to be issued.

In bright moonlight the vast array of vehicles began to move off at 6 p.m.; ahead went a screen of tanks and guns; behind came the two infantry brigades, headquarters group and B echelon groups; second to last was the administrative group, of which Supply Company was a part; and at the tail two French groups and an anti-tank battery. Supply Company, less 5 Platoon, moved off at 7.30 p.m. behind **Petrol Company**. With the moon to light their way—there were no lights—drivers had to keep station in desert formation at visibility distance of 50 yards. Nine abreast, the unending column rolled across the undulating, scrub-covered country, nosing into and out of wadis and struggling over sand dunes. Now and then a truck would bog down in sand; a neighbouring vehicle would hitch up, and away they would go.

It was 3.30 a.m. when Supply Company came to rest. **Petrol Company** made an issue, but none was made by Supply Company.

During the move the Corps had received a signal 'Benghasi Minus', a

pre-arranged code which meant that Army believed the enemy was aware of the outflanking movement but was not reacting. **General Freyberg** decided, therefore, not to wait until the following night to continue the move, but to push on in daylight, and throughout the 20th the Corps streamed across the desert, halting that night with the Tebaga range ahead, a silhouette in the moonlight. It was 4.30 p.m. before Supply Company moved off. It halted at 7.30 p.m. well to the south of the main Corps group, after covering 14 miles.

That day the battle for the gap began. On the coast **30 Corps** began its frontal attack.

Supply Company, swinging away from the Corps axis, reached an area north of **Bir Soltane** at 1 p.m. on 21 March, and made the first issue of the move—two days' rations and water. Meanwhile, trundling up the Corps axis was the New Zealand FMC from **Bir Amir**. The Corps had scarcely started on its way before the FMC had begun to pack and follow; 5 Platoon was packing 23 vehicles at 7 a.m. on the 20th, and by 2 p.m. the convoy was snaking along the axis track. It overtook and passed third-line transport, and halted for the night when it bumped into Rear Division, 40 miles up the track. Enemy aircraft dropped flares and bombs nearby during the night. Next morning the convoy struggled through soft sand towards **Bir Soltane**, passing Free French columns of infantry, artillery and armoured cars, 'native troops and Sacred Greeks in jeeps armed to the teeth'. Picking its way through confusing tracks and inaccurate maps, 5 Platoon reached **Bir Soltane** before noon, and on flat, scrub-covered country laid out a DID horse-shoe fashion, with accounts and indents at the mouth of the U, postal one side, and the dispersal area some distance away.

There was a 'slight flap' during the afternoon when word came that the enemy was approaching along the **Medenine** road—presumably from the position he still held at Ksar el Hallouf. The guard for the FMC area was a French force with field artillery—75s—and native troops.

Behind the FMC transport came the third-line transport with fresh

supplies, and 5 Platoon had hardly settled in at **Bir Soltane** when 17 General Transport Company came in with 105 trucks of supplies to unload. The task began at 4 p.m. and continued into the night; a cloud-streaked sky and sometimes rain obscured the moon. The work was nearing completion at 9.30 p.m. when a bomber came down and spat tracer and cannon shells in all directions. There were no casualties but plenty of frights: Headquarters FMC pulled down its tents, and most of 5 Platoon in the DID disappeared under a stack of cigarette cases.

Thus, by the evening of 21 March, **New Zealand Corps** was nudging against the enemy defences in **Tebaga Gap**, while not far in the rear the administrative services, in confident expectancy of success, were open for business and gathering in supplies as they were ferried from the old FMC site at **Bir Amir**.

From the morning of 22 March onwards, New Zealand Division—through Supply Company—and **8 Armoured Brigade** were able to draw from an FMC right at their back door, while the long haul from the rear was left to the general transport companies. This, indeed, was something new for a force so far from its base.

Fighting units, too, were quickly rid of their prisoners. The first bunch of 800, all Italians, came back on 22 March to a cage at **Bir Soltane** next to the supply depot, and their number continued to grow. By the 23rd there were 2400 in the cage, an unpleasant prospect for anyone to the leeward of them. They contained many youths who apparently had never shaved. A bomb that dropped 400 yards from the DID on the 24th brought a wild wailing from the prisoner-of-war cage.

But while **New Zealand Corps** was driving a wedge into the **Tebaga Gap**, **30 Corps** on the coast, after initial success, had a setback. General Montgomery promptly decided to switch his line of attack, and despatched **10 Corps**, which included **1 Armoured Division**, to join **New Zealand Corps**. The plan was first to capture a hill feature on the right to prevent enemy observation; then there was to be an all-out attack by New Zealand Division to blast a hole in the enemy line through which **1**

Armoured Division would pass to capture **El Hamma**. This operation was **SUPERCHARGE II**.

While **10 Corps** tanks and trucks came rolling up the diamond track, preparations were made for the attack. On the night of 25–26 March, with a sandstorm choking the atmosphere, the final deployments were made, a disconcerting experience for Supply Company, which on that day had itself moved forward. There was a suggestion that it was camped in the line of a possible enemy thrust, and during the night tanks came clattering through the darkness and streamed by—but they were, of course, British.

Supply Company left its position near **Bir Soltane** late on the morning of 25 March; it moved west to the **Bir Soltane** road, followed this for about 20 miles, then turned north and took up a position in the desert due south of the **Tebaga Gap**. At **Bir Soltane** preparations were being made to hand over the FMC to **10 Corps**. All this time the pack transport had been lifting from the old FMC site at **Bir Amir** and carrying forward to **Bir Soltane**, a task that was completed on 25 March in time for the unprepared **10 Corps** to take over a fully stocked FMC as a going concern. Ten Corps, in fact, was churning along the dusty track as the last two platoons carrying 125,000 rations were being unloaded at 5 Platoon's DID. The New Zealand FMC was disbanded next day, as bombers and fighters roared overhead to fling their barbs at the enemy in the blitzkrieg attack.

While, in swirling dust and sticky heat, the disbanded NZ FMC group made its way forward to rejoin the Division, the Division itself, headed by tanks, was driving its wedge deeper into the **Tebaga Gap**. The new attack burst on the enemy on the afternoon of the 26th. Tanks and infantry broke through the enemy position and secured a passage for the exploitation force. Though fighting went on at some points during the night, by dusk enemy resistance had ceased in most places, and on the 27th the British forces poured through the **Tebaga Gap** and fanned out.

Behind them in the gap they left the litter of battle. When 4 Platoon

of Supply Company moved up in the calm heat of the 29th to replenish the Division, it followed a track that led through a minefield and onto the narrow plain, flanked by broken hills, that was the gap; everywhere there were dugouts, wrecked vehicles, helmets, rifles, guns and German tanks with their mutilated crews still in 'occupation'. The replenishment area was about 12 kilometres from **El Hamma**, off the **Gabes-Kibili** road.

Supply Company had moved forward to the mouth of the gap on 28 March in a dust-storm that generated enough static electricity in trucks to draw a quarter-inch spark. Beyond the gap the forward forces were advancing on **Gabes** as **30 Corps** came up the coast from the south. Thus **Gabes** fell into Eighth Army's hands on 29 March, and the army pushed on north to the next obstacle, **Wadi Akarit**.

The sun now shone brilliantly. In its warmth Supply Company moved forward through the gap on the 30th and halted about 15 miles from **Gabes**. Next day it sent forward 1 and 5 Platoons—with rations—and 3 Platoon 6 RMT—with water—into the bustle of traffic around **Gabes**. 'A beautiful clear spring day with hot sun,' noted Quirk in his diary: 'Green stunted shrubs, but little grass.'

Gabes itself he found a 'pretty little place, but much damaged by bombing. Modern hotel, cinema and shops, toy railway station. Well dressed handsome French women and children. Small wharf and lovely beach. Modern schools, even a stadium. Gala as the French forces arrive; officers in serge and the general [Leclerc] in scarlet vest mingling with the civilians. Bearded priest surrounded by soldiers.'

On 31 March **New Zealand Corps** ceased to exist. New Zealand Division passed back under the command of **30 Corps**, but depended for its administration on **10 Corps**.

General Montgomery, thin-faced and slight, wearing his traditional black beret with two badges, and affecting a greying moustache, sat with **General Freyberg** on a small hillock. Officers and NCOs of the New Zealand Division sat informally around. Gunfire grumbled along the

Akarit line to the north, now and then surging a little louder. In his thin voice General Montgomery reviewed the past and took a confident look at the future; he told his listeners that English divisions were to make a breach in the Akarit defences through which the New Zealanders would pass. The situation called for patience, and enemy air activity was likely to be severe. But he characteristically had no doubt about the final result: this was to be an enemy **Dunkirk.**



Supply Point at Forli
Supply Point at Forli



Bombed supply area at the silk factory, Forli
Bombed supply area at the silk factory, Forli



Passing through Padua on the way to Trieste
Passing through Padua on the way to Trieste



Maj I. E. Stock and Brig S. H. Crump
Maj I. E. Stock and Brig S. H. Crump



Maj E. J. Stock
Maj E. J. Stock



Capt E. P. Davis
Capt E. P. Davis



Maj N. M. Pryde
Maj N. M. Pryde



Maj J. R. Morris
Maj J. R. Morris



Maj L. Bean
Maj L. Bean



Maj R. E. Rawle
Maj R. E. Rawle



Maj L. W. Roberts
Maj L. W. Roberts

On this day, 2 April, General Montgomery had good reasons for optimism. The enemy was enclosed within a long, slender rectangle, with the British First Army and 2 United States Corps to his west and Eighth Army to his south. The first major move was up to Eighth Army, which was to push north and link up with First Army. The two would then confine the enemy to his last stronghold around Tunis.

Though few probably realised it then, this was to be Eighth Army's last advance in the long series since the Alamein breakthrough. Eighth Army was to bump against the formidable Enfidaville positions, and the final kill was to be made by First Army, whose front offered easier movement.

This last advance was something entirely new for the New Zealanders. 'Left hooks' were not always possible, and where they were, the enemy did not wait long enough for the now well known plan to be put into operation. This meant that the New Zealanders were to form part of the main attacking force that was to move north like a broom, sweeping rearguard groups ahead of it as the enemy fell back to his final position. This in turn meant that the ASC companies were to operate along the main stream of supplies, and though the New Zealanders were constantly mobile, Supply Company was able to operate a day by day replenishment routine that had never before been possible except when the Division had been static.

And finally, Eighth Army was now entering friendly territory; ahead lay green, cultivated lands, and people who would welcome the army as a liberator, not a conqueror.

For Supply Company there was no administrative buildup for this operation; in the first days of April it worked to a steady routine under a pleasant Tunisian sun. There were air raids round about and a few uncomfortably close bombs, and one evening—3 April—Bofors chased a plane over Supply Company lines with Shellbursts snapping at its heels. Further away, over the port, an aircraft erupted into flame and 'seared along the horizon like a blazing firebrand'.

On 5 April Supply Company found the replenishment area smothered by all the heterogeneous transport of 4 Indian Division and part of 50 Division, and the convoy had to thread its way to the rear and set up in clear ground. When the men returned home, they found they were on one hour's notice to move as from the following day.

At 4.15 a.m. on the 6th gunfire came rumbling back through the darkness to where Supply Company was camped; the barrage for operation SCIPIO, the attack on the Akarit line, had begun, and the divisions that had claimed Supply Company's replenishment area the previous day were smashing their way through the defences. New Zealand Division was waiting in the rear. By the morning of 7 April the enemy had withdrawn from the Akarit line, and the pursuit was on.

'8 April: Lovely clear day, so we sunbathed while waiting to move. Triggs issued one day up the Div axis track.' This was the mood of the morning on which Supply Company picked up its chattels and trailed after the Division: no hustle or bustle; just pleasant weather and orderly routine. When had an operation begun so sedately? The war diary reads:

No 4 platoon issues one day's rations ex No 1 platoon. No 3 platoon issues one day's water to all Div units. Rep area in rear of 1 NZ Amn Coy. No 1 refills with rations at 224 FMC; No 3 refills with water at FMC. Coy, less platoons which are replenishing, moves at 1130 hours and travels 31 miles in a northerly direction along the Div axis track and then stages for the night, after passing through Wadi Akarit, a strong position recently held by the enemy.

Along the roads that day poured a great deal of transport of all descriptions, all squeezing down the few tracks permitted by a confusion of wadis and the narrow gap between the sea and the impassable Chott basin to the west. And jostling back in the opposite direction came truck loads of Germans and Italians, the latter without escort. Around the Akarit positions were abandoned guns, gaping craters and an occasional body.

Next morning 5 Platoon opened the supply point—9 a.m. was the official time, but unit vehicles were early—and issues were made to trucks that had come back almost 30 miles. They brought back good news: the Division was near **Sfax**; the crew of a Mark VI Special tank—the Tiger—had surrendered with the tank intact, and another had been knocked out. Meanwhile 3 Platoon was issuing water, and 2 Platoon was reaching back to 225 FMC to replenish. The main part of Supply Company was moving up along the axis track. And so, as the Division advanced, Supply Company marched forward like a striding man, with one foot always forward near the front and one behind at the supply depot at **Gabes**; and between them the body moved steadily forward—31 miles on the 8th, 31 on the 10th, 12 on the 11th, 21 on the 12th, 72 on the 13th. The whole thing operated with an efficient simplicity. The axis track, clearly marked with the black diamond, was a sure guide to the most indolent of navigators. The supply point, scheduled to open at 9 a.m. each day, did so automatically wherever Ammunition Company—which was well up in the advance—halted for the morning, and supply convoys adopted the practice of going forward in the afternoon until they found Ammunition Company and then trailing along behind until it halted—and there was the replenishment area for the next day. Unit vehicles had simply to come back down the axis track until they found the area.

On 9 April this process was carried on along dusty tracks and amid hood-high barley crops. Next day the company drove on through fields of barley. Locusts drew a yellow cloud across the sky, then settled and began to strip away the green, and the trucks rolled across the undulating country, crushing crops and locusts beneath their wheels. At Triaga, west of **Sfax**, the Division's axis of advance emerged onto a road and led towards **La Hencha** between orderly groves. Nos. 2 and 5 Platoons and 3 Platoon 6 RMT, pushing ahead to overtake Ammunition Company for the next day's issue, parked off this road for tea. The front was not far ahead, friendly fighter aircraft were now out of range, and unwelcome visitors were expected. Sure enough they came—stray raiders spraying tracer and scintillating butterfly bombs, and lighting up the

night with flares. The Supply Company group nosed in under olive trees for the night, and watched a brilliant flare and bombing display about four miles to the rear.



Gabs to Enfidaville

Gabs to Enfidaville

There was brilliance in the morning, too—grass, marigolds and row upon row of neat olive trees. Ammunition Company was overtaken about a mile ahead, and the supply point set up in the beautiful surroundings of an olive grove just off the track. It was a sunny day, and from a well the men obtained soft water for a luxurious wash.

Later Quirk took a group 35 miles through beautiful country into **Sfax**,

...an interesting and pleasant town, absolutely wrecked by bombing. Many large SYSTEM buildings, banks, hotels just a shambles, and rest absolutely smashed by the Hun. Town appeared completely evacuated. 51st Div in control, and usual **8th Army** efficiency evident. Harbour and warehouses a real job with fishing smacks sunk. Civilians aplenty in the outskirts, neat modern villas, Tricolor everywhere, and FFL in great demand.

Thus, as the advance moved on past **Sousse** and on to **Enfidaville**, Supply Company followed along, at El Djem striking out to the coast at

Mahdia and halting on 13 April—the day the Division breasted up to the **Enfidaville positions—at **Moknine**, south of **Sousse**.**

It was in country of intoxicating beauty; the supply point on the 13th was among flowers of scarlet, purple, gold, white and lavender. Everywhere there were poppies, marigolds, daisies. As petals are strewn before the conqueror, the flowers seemed to symbolise Eighth Army's victory. Seven months ago, at the nadir of its fortunes, it had attacked across a dry, stony desert; now, 2000 miles from its starting point, the enemy was preparing to make his last stand. There were still bitter fighting and hard-won gains ahead, but by and large Eighth Army had come to the end of the line.

In mid-April 1943 there was some excuse for excessive optimism. There was a general feeling of well-being fostered by victory, a mellow climate, pleasant surroundings and a cordial populace. And at the supply point, four miles south-west of **Sousse on the El Djem road, there were encouraging rumours that the Division would be 'out in eight days and back to New Zealand'.**

It was a long time since the Division had known an atmosphere as friendly as this—not since the first days of **Greece when the New Zealanders had been acclaimed as defenders of freedom. In villages, as Supply Company convoys moved up with supplies from 227 FMC at Djem, French and Arab men, women and children waved flags, clapped and cheered, took our men into their homes and wined and dined them. Like **Greece**, and in contrast to **Egypt** and the dusty wastes beyond, this was indeed civilisation—a civilisation of trim homes, attractive women and cordiality.**

It was not entirely unspotted. There were odd plague corners like **Kairouan, where a cesspit of dead donkeys and olive leaves festered in a general air of flies and decomposition, and even the Arab's friendliness, the French warned, was not as sincere as it appeared. But in the circumstances these odd blemishes could be circumnavigated or overlooked in the enjoyment of a congenial present and the anticipation**

of a promising future.

There were, however, one or two things that could not be overlooked, such as the radio report that the enemy still had 170,000 men in **Tunisia** and that there was no sign of evacuation. And if the Division was to be withdrawn, there would have been little point in forming **1 NZ Mule Pack Company**, which came into being on 17 April. The purpose of this company was to provide transport for rations, water and ammunition when the Division advanced into the rugged country ahead of it; here Supply Company's wheeled mobility, so valuable hitherto, would have been useless. As it happened, the Division did no more than penetrate the fringes of the hills, and the Mule Pack Company was never called on to operate. Its one contribution to the welfare of the Division was a race meeting.

Nevertheless, a lot of work went into organising and training this unit. Supply Company's contribution was one officer, Lieutenant Irvine, and thirteen men, and Supply Company provided some of the trucks that carried the motley assortment of mules from the Marche d'Olives at **Sfax** to the Mule Pack Company's headquarters at **Sidi Bou Ali**.

Mules, incidentally, were not the only livestock purchased by the Division at this time. Two hundred live sheep came forward to Supply Company on 15 April and were issued to units at the supply point—'Like Addington sale day.'

Whatever the prospects, Supply Company took no chances with the future and went to great pains to ensure its comfort. Comforts were, understandably, not readily available in the Eighth Army area, but the **Naafi** had had plenty of time to establish itself in the **First Army** sector, and a small party was sent away with a truck and between £300 and £400 to see what it could get. The party had first to weave its way through 'shot-up' roads and destroyed bridges before it emerged onto good roads and green, mountainous country that bore a resemblance to New Zealand. For five days they toured the area, not only purchasing from **Naafi** with forged requisitions, but adopting a cunning procedure of

sending one man in at a time, each apparently from a different unit. They returned to the unit—to the surprise of many—with a laden truck and no money. There had been some sceptics who were betting they wouldn't return.

Eighth Army attacked again on the night of 19–20 April. The New Zealand Division assaulted the forbidding **Takrouna** feature—a village perched atop a rocky pinnacle that towered above the plain from which the New Zealanders had to attack—and a long spur to the east. During the 20th Supply Company moved up through **Sousse** into the groves and wadis of the hilly country eight miles northwest of the town, not far from where the Mule Pack Company was established.

The initial New Zealand attack succeeded against stiff opposition, and in accordance with Eighth Army's allotted task of keeping the enemy engaged, pressure was maintained. Fifth Brigade was withdrawn from the line on the night of 23–24 April, and **6 Brigade** pushed on with the advance until it also was withdrawn on the night of 26–27 April. Further west, meanwhile, **First Army** had begun the thrust that was to bring about the end of the campaign in **Africa**.

On 28 April, after issuing in the oppressive heat of the supply point, now among cactus hedges to the north, Supply Company was visited by the Minister of Defence, the Hon. F. Jones. As at every other unit he visited, he was met with a barrage of questions, most of which were about the Division's return to New Zealand; but he parried without a definite answer.

Early in May the Division moved west to a new sector at **Djebibina**. The main and final attack against the enemy forces in **Tunisia** was begun by **First Army** on 6 May, and opposition crumpled before it. But the tenacious Germans still did not give up entirely. Although Allied forces were cutting ice-skating figures about the Tunisian peninsula and collapse was inevitable, forces in the south-eastern sector defied Eighth Army almost until the last moment. Peace feelers at last came from General Messe, who had succeeded Rommel, on 12 May. Curiously

enough, even this was of only secondary importance, for on this day a great number of New Zealanders were engaged elsewhere and not really caring whether the enemy surrendered today or tomorrow.

The situation was mildly fantastic, but it was quite in character that when the enemy was giving up the fight on their front the New Zealanders should be more interested in running a race meeting. Two days earlier this curious notice had appeared at the bottom of Supply Company routine orders:

NZ MULE & DONKEY TURF CLUB (Inc.)

An invitation is extended to all officers and ORs to attend the spring meeting of the NZ MULE AND DONKEY TURF CLUB (Inc.) to be held at **SIDI BOU ALI**, commencing at 1230 hours Wednesday 12 May 43.

Entrance to the course $\frac{1}{4}$ mile NORTH of 1 NZ MULE PACK COY'S area along axis track.

Transport leaves this HQ at 1130 hours.

- | | |
|---|--------------------------------------|
| RACE | 1. 1300 hrs. SFAX MAIDEN RACE |
| 2. 1345 hrs. SOUSSE STAKES | |
| 3. 1430 hrs. MAADI DERBY | |
| 4. 1530 hrs. TUNISIAN CUP | |
| 5. 1635 hrs. SIDI BOU ALI STAKES | |
| 6. 1700 hrs. ENFIDAVILLE NURSERY | |

The turf club, of course, was the Mule Pack Company, which had conceived the idea of a modest race meeting as a diversion from war—and possibly as an outlet from the frustration of inactivity. But if it was planned on a modest scale, it was executed with lavish detail. Not the smallest part of the work was handed to Driver **Gerard**,¹ of Supply Company, who had been ‘prevailed upon’—the term used in the Mule Pack Company's unofficial history—to select and train a totalisator staff and prepare tickets. With Corporal Hendrey,² Gerard built not only a tote, but also a tote barometer.



While preparations were under way, word of the projected meeting was spreading, and on the day of the event crowds were pouring in long before the first race. Among the 5000 who were there when the GOC, **Major-General Kippenberger**, arrived were representatives of the nursing services, the **RAF**, the **USAAF**, the Union Defence Force (South African), and Australian, Indian and British units. They packed each side of the track six to ten deep. From a **SYSTEM** address system boomed the genial voice of Captain Selwyn **Toogood**.³

This was one meeting at which the student of form was at a loss. There had been no previous performances, no animal was allowed to run more than once, and in any case the stubborn trait of both mules and donkeys had an embarrassing tendency to take possession of the leading animal when the post was in sight, and it would sit down and refuse to budge. When the shouting died down, gunfire could be heard rumbling about 10 miles to the north, and if anyone cared to look he could see the smoke and dust of battle.

During the day Gerard's staff handled £3000.

This race meeting later served a very useful purpose that was certainly not contemplated at the time. Gambling and trading were rife in **Tunisia**; the easy money derived from trading, in fact, fostered the gambling. When at the end of the campaign the Division went back to **Egypt**, all French money was naturally converted into Egyptian, and

Supply Company orderly room acquired a pile of French currency that filled a kerosene tin. A count showed that Supply Company men had put in for exchange more money than they had drawn for their pay. One platoon, at least, No. 2, was lined up and asked to account for this remarkable phenomenon. Each man replied with gravity that he had backed a winner at the races.

The day after the race meeting General Messe surrendered to **General Freyberg**. And that was that. The work that General Wavell had taken up three years before was at last completed, and like a pricked balloon the North African war had gone flat. Down the roads came streaming prisoners, some marching, some driving their own trucks.

But the flatness did not last long for the New Zealand Division. Without delay it was to move back to **Egypt**, and on the night of 13–14 May word came that three days' rations were to be issued. The 14th was a frantic day, and on the 15th the first of the two flights into which the Division had been split for the move set off with the ASC leading.

There was a little mild fantasy, too, about this last grand movement of the Division in North Africa. Its vehicles were veterans of many miles and campaigns; the last general issue of transport to the Division had been before the second Libyan campaign, late in 1941, and a good deal of the transport now in use was from this issue. Despite new engines and the motherly care of workshops, no vehicle that has seen almost eighteen months of army work, eighteen months that have brought every type of condition from blazing heat and dust to rain and clinging mud, can be quite the same. It became a point of honour, therefore, that every vehicle should be driven into **Maadi** under its own steam, and there were many bets between units—couched in such terms as, 'I'll give you five breakdowns in...'—on who would get home with the most mobile vehicles.

But all the ardour in the world could not will a broken truck into mobility, and in the last analysis it was the workshops who really got the Division home in the best order possible. Supply Company

workshops, faced with the appalling job of nursing several hundred old vehicles across 2000 miles without adequate spare parts for the task, had to scrounge about as best it could. It picked from derelicts and 'borrowed' from whatever depots it could gain access to. A group went ahead to **Tobruk**, and after picking through a vast stack of tires came out with 162 of suitable sizes. The depot later caught fire, and Supply Company got the blame.

Against this background, Supply Company set off for **Maadi** early on the morning of 15 May. For soldiers there is always a nostalgia for old scenes—or rather, perhaps not so much a nostalgia as a curiosity to take one more look at familiar places, and along the length of the north-east African coast there were many familiar places for New Zealanders. They did not all have pleasant memories, they were not all the scenes of victory, but in these circumstances there is a certain satisfaction to be gained even from looking across the field of earlier defeat and knowing that all that was lost then has been accounted for many times.

Supply Company, of course, had no fighting victories—or defeats—to recall, but as a part of the Division that had borne its share of the burden it could share, too, the memories; and even an ASC unit has its times of trial and elation that come not from being in direct contact with the enemy but from serving those who are. Supply Company's was a task of devotion, a task that had little glamour but which could give immense satisfaction. At the end of the North African campaign, and as their vehicles rolled east towards **Egypt**, this was something on which the Supply Company men could rest in modest pride, and it was something that entitled them to watch the country go by with the belief that they had helped to win it.

It was a memorable journey. Quirk's diary captures the atmosphere of those days with vivid realism.

15 May: Reveille 0430 and on the road at six. Some of the leave personnel AWL in **Tunis** will get a shock to find us gone. Through **Sfax** and down the coast, but apparently we were on the wrong track, and

below **Mahares** had to turn in along the **Gafsa** line. Shocking track and everyone bitchy, many with hang-overs. Through old battlefield at Akarit and hot Y track again moving through 5 IB after tea and parked for night.

16 May: Away at 0700 down Y track ... joined **Gabes** road and later through town. A pleasant place. On to **Mareth** and the remains of the defences and signs of battle. Mines by the heaps. Careful now! **Medenine** and what a great view Jerry had of us on the plain below. To **Ben Gardane**, and halted for tea, and later I took 4 and 5 and 1 [platoons] on to spend the night on a salt flat at **Zuara**. Road across frontier was better than I expected, but plenty of transport. SAF engineers all the way along working on it.

17 May: Away 0700. Triggs and I on ahead. Very pretty drive through orchards and crops. **Sabratha**, some lovely buildings and also Roman ruins. Wish I had more time, but it always seems to be a race for the Kiwis. We take a trip of 2000 miles just like an everyday task. A hectic time making all arrangements for the sup. point. Rations 98,000 are loaded and delivered on RASC transport. Triggs issues tomorrow. ASC gp, Div and 5 IB arrived late afternoon. Terrific vehicle and tyre trouble. Tommies say 1st Ech are going home when we arrive at **Cairo**.

18 May: The Div is just alive with rumours about going home.

Supply Company on the 18th remained at **Suani Ben Adem** and issued four days' rations and uplifted a further two from **Tripoli**.

19 May: Away at 0700. I took three vehicles on ahead to collect bread at **Misurata**. Pleasant driving today as the air was cool and towards lunch time it rained heavily. The land fringing the road is just barely fertile. Some olive trees, vines and crops of wheat and barley, and within visibility it reverts to desert. Homes all have the sayings of Musso all well scrubbed off. **Misurata** seems a shell of a town in spite of very handsome buildings. The Itais build a magnificent pile, but never have they an air of comfort.

20 May: Unable to proceed this morning because of a washout 64 miles from Misurata. Will be thankful to be on the move again. We moved off at 1900 hours to try to catch up some of the leeway. Tank transporter convoy ahead of us was still parked up. Evidence of cloud burst washed away demolition. Parked for night about midnight. A brilliant moon, but everyone very tired, especially when the pace is slow.

21 May: Head of convoy moved 0600 but we were not under way until 0700. Very slow beginning. Very clear and rather chilly first thing. Long, monotonous journey this. Just scrubby desert on either hand past Buerat where Africa Corps trained in 1940. The defence lines were just tons of mines. 44 DID isolated and forlorn. What a job. Solitary RAF listening post and sigs test point. Sirte a small town complete with Albergo. We by-pass it and read the notices of booby traps and mines. A gem, 'No loot, no view. Mines bus.'⁴ All the aerodromes deserted except Buerat. Through familiar country of Nofilia, much browner and not so pretty. Went ahead of coy and parked for the night on old rep area.

22 May: Got under way 0600 and on our own past Agheila. Monotonous drive with a rotten cross wind and dust flying. The defence line at Mersa Brega looked tremendously strong—huge minefields. This was a long punishing journey of 260 miles and I was pleased to see Benghazi with its green. Berka aerodrome immense and just bristling with Liberators and Yanks. Benghazi not excessively damaged and rubble all cleaned up. Parked for the night close to the town and everyone feeling happy. We are near civilisation again. Used wireless truck to contact Div.

23 May: Was busy jacking up tomorrow's draw. Six days for all. 86,000 rations from BSD, fresh veges from 18 DID and bread from bakery. Staging area seven kilos out on Barce road.

24 May: Big day today. Commenced drawing at 0700 hours. 55 trucks in all. Went without a hitch. Issues went well though shortage of transport by 6IB was a difficulty.

This issue was the best performance of Supply Company to date. After drawing 86,000 rations in the morning, it issued them in the afternoon and had completed by 6 p.m.

25 May: Walked around the waterfront and surveyed the damage of nearly three years' bombing. Set out for **Barce** at 1030. Up Tocra pass a steep climb into fertile country of the Barce Valley. Usual Itai tenant houses all ransacked and deserted. **Barce** a pleasant town, undamaged with lots of trees, thence by coast road to Cirene. Good country with crops of oats and barley being worked by **Senussi** and they appear to be doing it well under British guidance. Tractors etc. Lovely drive through gorge country similar to parts of New Zealand bush and green grey hills. Cirene on escarpment overlooking the sea Peaceful, sunny and quiet with shady trees.

And so on 26 May through **Derna**, a splash of emerald where a gully through an escarpment gives out to the blue **Mediterranean**. Supply Company was getting into more familiar country now: its trucks had been this way since the days of Wavell's campaign. Quirk found it a 'grand drive in the bright morning sun.'

I opened the top and enjoyed the view from the escarpment across the town to the sea. Pleasant spot. Zig zag out is very steep and slowed convoy. Grand view and country still green. Country around **Tmimi** ablaze with grass fires sweeping down to the road edge. Just as we approached a wall of dense smoke, a minefield went up with regular explosions on our left and shrapnel was flying everywhere. Hard down and blind flying for a minute. **Tobruk** at last, the blue of the sea makes a perfect setting. The salvage dump was on fire and the ammo started to explode as we passed. ⁵

At **Tobruk** there was news, exciting news. 'It seems pretty certain that 1st contingent married men are going home,' Quirk wrote in his diary.

Eastwards from **Tobruk** the road is flanked to the south by a scrub-

covered plain that reaches back to the first of the escarpments. This was indeed familiar country, familiar and, with the desert's timeless countenance, unchanged. But everything was not unchanged, for moving westward along the road were American Air Force convoys with magnificent equipment that 'astounded us'. 'Huge tankers and articulated trailers,' noted Quirk.

They go for trailers in a big way. Every vehicle has one to carry the men's gear while they ride comfortably in seats. Made **Buq Buq** for the night, and was not pleased by our first view of the Gyppos again. 'Baksheesh' was the very first greeting as we crossed the frontier. They have cleaned up much of this country and today were busy blowing mines around **Bardia**.

28 May: Awful convoy today. Stops and starts all day. Strong keen wind. **Matruh** is cleaned up greatly and has quite a peaceful garrison air.

29 May: A short hop again today. Familiar scenes of **Kassaba** and **Baggush** with plenty of Hun wreckage, particularly aircraft. Staged night at **Daba**. Still as windy and dusty as ever. Major departed for Alex tonight.

30 May: Uneventful trip to **Amiriya** turning off along the back road to **Burg el Arab**. Pushed on to **Wadi Natrun**.

The next morning Supply Company cleared **Wadi Natrun** at 7.15 a.m., passed through **Mena** and, dusty and dirty, entered **Maadi** Camp at 10.30 a.m., with the speedometer reading 1951 miles from the starting point in **Tunisia**. And only one NZASC vehicle was towed in; it had seized a bearing at **Mena**.

¹ **Cpl W. G. Gerard**; born NZ, 21 Mar 1906; farmer; died 7 Nov 1951.

² **2 Lt C. B. P. Hendrey**; **Auckland**; born **Auckland**, 15 Nov 1914; truck driver.

³ **Maj S. F. Toogood, m.i.d.; Wellington; born Wellington, 4 Apr 1916; theatre manager.**

⁴ ***Bus: only.***

⁵ **Presumably this was Sup Coy's fire.**

SUPPLY COMPANY

CHAPTER 12 – ARRIVAL IN ITALY

CHAPTER 12

Arrival in Italy

THE New Zealand Division returned to **Maadi** in mid-1943 in a mood very different from that of its former homecomings. Previously—after **Crete** and the second Libyan campaign—it had come back once in defeat and each time badly mauled, and with an unfinished task always before it. It came now in good trim and with a mission completed beyond dispute. And this time the homewardbound ships were taking not only wounded, but men who had earned furlough in New Zealand.

It was all very satisfactory, but the honeymoon atmosphere was too good to last. An army in war never finds rest—for rest brings rust. An army, or a division, is a weapon that must be constantly tuned and tested and given employment of some sort. For the New Zealand Division this meant training and refitting, and for Supply Company three months of routine ‘general duties’ and training, first at **Maadi** and then at **Fayum**. In the workshops at **Maadi** vehicles went over the pits. Engines that had drawn immense loads over immense distances were taken out and reconditioned, a policy with which the Supply Company workshops officer, Captain Barnett, emphatically disagreed. At huge cost thousands of engines were brought into apparently new condition by Egyptian labour and refitted into vehicles. But there was a serious flaw. The inside of the connecting rods had not been tinned, allowing the babbit to break out when the engines resumed their work, and later in **Italy** men stood up to their waists in snow while taking out engines that should never have been fitted and replacing them with new ones.

Three dull months of army routine is about as much as the human spirit can stand without some sort of reaction, and the heat and dust of the Egyptian mid-summer did nothing to make life more bearable. **Cairo** seemed to lose its glitter and there was at least one reminder that if the enemy was banished from **Africa**, the exacting requirements of active service still applied. This was brought home very soon after the return from **Tunisia** when, on 10 June, Supply Company routine orders noted a

‘serious leakage of information (i.e. discussion of troop movements)’ by ‘certain drivers of this unit.’ The order stressed the need for silence on details of arrangements learned during the course of duty. ‘In this respect the NZASC is regarded as being in a position of trust,’ the order told them. ‘This trust will NOT be betrayed.’ And for good measure, the order quoted a sharply worded instruction by General Maitland Wilson to presidents and members of courts martial that men found guilty of breaches of security should be awarded exemplary punishment from which they could expect no reprieve. ‘Silence is imperative,’ said the instruction. ‘Silence is my order, and I shall not condone any breach of it.’

The mood suited the times, for big events were afoot that demanded the protection of security. While the New Zealand Division was refitting in **Egypt**, Fifth and Eighth Armies were striking across the **Mediterranean** to **Sicily** and thence to the mainland of **Italy**. Fifth Army pushed on up the left flank from **Salerno** and Eighth Army on the right from **Taranto**. Mussolini toppled, and Marshal Badoglio, who assumed command, secretly negotiated a peace.

Whether the New Zealanders would join the fight in **Italy** or go elsewhere was still a top secret, but all through September preparations went on—preparations that were to be completed by the end of that month.

During August, the 10th Reinforcements arrived, and on 2 September one officer and sixty-nine other ranks were posted to Supply Company. The number homeward bound from Supply Company was two officers and thirty-eight other ranks, and the unit was again up to strength. The time had come for some event to mark the end of—well, almost of an era—and on 3 September Supply Company held a ball at Littoria Club, **Mena**. It was planned on a grand scale, and various notable guests included **General Freyberg**. It ended in disaster. Two Supply Company vehicles collided on Mena Road, killing one man, Driver **Collins**,¹ and injuring five others, who were sent to hospital.

Training went on, and at last in mid-September there came a sign of movement when an advance party was sent to **Burg el Arab** to set up a supply point. Most of the Division marched to **Burg el Arab**, but Supply Company drove there at its ease on 19 September. On the 20th Major Morris relinquished command—he was off home on furlough—and Major **Bean**² took over. The period of idleness was nearing an end, and Supply Company began to look forward to the future.

The signs of impending movement multiplied, and Supply Company made the most of leave to **Alexandria** and swimming opportunities, and took a lively interest in the **Naafi** tent across the road, ‘the only point of interest in this arid, sun-baked spot,’ one man recalls. ‘It was rumoured that this institution had received 25,000 bottles of beer, and half an hour before opening on the first night (after Supply Company's arrival) a queue of thirsty troops was already lined up and extended 300 or 400 yards down the road. They felt this to be their last opportunity for indulgence before departing for the unknown. The ration was two bottles a head with a repetition for those with the patience and endurance to go through the whole performance again.’

Anti-malarial ointment and atebrin tablets were issued, anti-typhus inoculations given, and non-swimmers were given swimming instruction. At last the destination was divulged; a special order of the day on 4 October announced that **Italy** was the next step. At Ikingi Maryut transit camp, meanwhile, the first flight had already been assembled. Units were to be distributed so that no more than a third was on each ship. The first flight of Supply Company was split between the *Dunottar Castle* and the *Reina del Pacifico*. The first convoy put out from **Alexandria** on 5 October. Hugging the North African coast, the ships sailed west under a constant aerial guard, then swung north, and on 9 October the sunlit coast of **Italy** began to appear. The troops watched as a tree-lined shore, backed by low hills, lifted into view; to the north the towers and domes of **Taranto** caught the morning sun.

From the ships anchored in the outer harbour the troops were

lightered ashore and, watched by shabby, dejected Italian soldiers, marched in single file through the city streets. Bomb-shattered buildings fringed the railway yards and waterfront, and here and there rubble obstructed the street. The troops marched on to the divisional area about five miles north of the city.

Southern **Italy** somehow combines a fresh beauty with age. Age is marked across the land by deeply rutted tracks, weathered stone walls, and crumbling ruins. But overlaying this the pastures, vineyards and spreading acres of olives, rolling across the undulations like a stilled sea, tint the countryside a refreshing green. Limestone outcroppings jut from beneath, and here and there among the olives a white village flashes among the green.

In these surroundings the Supply Company advance party, which had disembarked first, set up a supply point and began to make itself comfortable. The company area was part of a large grove, in which the men set up their bivvies, two or three grouping themselves under a tree. The next day every available man was sent abroad on a scavenging expedition for timber, firewood and anything that could be used to improve the camp. The assortment of articles that was brought back included limestone blocks, doors, windows, sashes, weatherboarding, timber of all shapes and sizes—and a ramshackle German tractor. The tractor was soon put to good use. Towing a railway sleeper, on which three or four top-weights rode aquaplane style, it formed a first-class grader in the formation of a football ground in the only clearing in the grove.

During leave to **Taranto** and unofficial wanderings about the countryside the men learned something about the country and the people. The peasants they found to be friendly and submissive. It seemed hard to reconcile them with any conception of 'fascist aggressors'.

Later in the month Supply Company moved to a new area near **Altamura**. Back in **Egypt**, meanwhile, the second flight was wallowing through a morass of army confusion. Vehicle-loading details from

various units of this flight moved down to **Suez** hard on the heels of the first flight and ran headlong into trouble. The tone of Supply Company's war diary grew daily more exasperated. On arrival on 7 October the detail found 'no tentage available at VMP and men had to be conveyed to transit camp 2½ miles distant, and on arrival there found facilities inadequate'. This was just the beginning. Day by day extracts are:

8 October: Many complaints made by troops concerning quality and quantity of food at transit camp. In some instances there was nothing to eat for those arriving late from the quay. Facilities for liaison between quay and transit camp were supposed to be organised, but nothing was carried out. Port detachments did nothing to assist our difficulties.

9 October: 24 vehicles sent to quay for loading; after arrival at quay the vehicles were sent back to VMP. On inquiries being made of the queer happenings, we were informed that the loading list had been completely altered, but strange to say the person responsible for this alteration was not to be found and no one could produce an amended copy of the loading list. Weights of vehicles now became another hazard confronting the DZO group. Whereas many vehicles on the original loading list were allowed to be up to 10 tons gross weight, loading derricks at the quay could handle loads up to 5 tons. This necessitated shifting loads from vehicle to vehicle on the park, but as the vehicles had not been over the weighbridge this was only guesswork.

10 October: On going to the weighbridge some vehicles were still overweight. This necessitated offloading on the quay. This, of course, slowed down and threw a further burden on the picquet.

11 October: Loading of the ship continued with much the same result as on the 10th. Vehicles now being transferred to transports —AZE, BZX and DZO and vice versa. In addition 19 Armd Regt and 20 Armd Regt arrived from **Burg el Arab** to join DZO.... Incidentally these two were the only units of DZO flight who were not hacked

to pieces and messed about.

12 October: Loading continued with vehicles still being messed about between ships. Officers had to hitch-hike between quay, camp and VMP in an endeavour to keep track of their vehicles.

13 October: The loading of vehicles was finally complete by the evening of 13th. The question of satisfactory accommodation caused all officers some concern. The shore officials did not seem interested and it proved quite impossible to locate the person responsible for accommodation on the ship. The allocated space was a position 'tween decks not already taken up by vehicles. At best it could not accommodate more than 100 men, and in a filthy condition.

And so, trouble by trouble, the New Zealanders wedged themselves aboard 'DZO transport', cleaned up their quarters, and found themselves room to sleep; some men had to sleep on deck or in vehicles.

The main part of Supply Company with the second flight sailed on 17 October and reached **Taranto** on 22 October. Transport DZO went with a convoy to **Malta**, then past **Sicily**—'Mount Etna snow capped and very like Mount Egmont'—and around to **Bari**. While part of Supply Company remained near **Taranto**, 4 Platoon was sent to a former prisoner-of-war camp near **Altamura**—well-known to other New Zealanders in less happy circumstances—to set up a DID.

The New Zealanders were at last established in **Italy**, and it was very soon brought home to them that the winter ahead would have its hardships. Rain, accompanied by lightning, pelted down, prompting the war diarist of transport DZO, still unloading at **Bari**, to note that work went on 'while it was raining like hell.' This was primly amended by a higher authority to 'very heavily'.

¹ **Dvr J. L. E. Collins**; born **Oamaru**, 26 Jan 1919; milk bar attendant; accidentally killed 3 Sep 1943.

² **Maj L. Bean, MBE, m.i.d.; Northern Rhodesia; born Bradford, England, 19 Sep 1914; schoolmaster; DAQMG 4 Armd Bde 1942–43; SC 6 Bde 1943; OC Sup Coy 20 Sep 1943–18 Apr 1944, 29 Nov 1944–3 Oct 1945.**

SUPPLY COMPANY

CHAPTER 13 – SANGRO AND CASSINO

CHAPTER 13

Sangro and Cassino

ONE of the first measures taken on arrival in **Italy** was to disconnect the front-wheel drive of all transport. Very soon afterwards they were reconnected. This was just the first of many mistakes, big and small, the New Zealanders made in their ignorance of what lay ahead. It was not that they were entirely uninformed of what **Italy** was like. But without experience no man can know the pitfalls of or the skills demanded by any given set of circumstances. From the broad, dry expanses of the desert, the New Zealanders were dropped abruptly into the narrow, twisting, muddy, congested roads of an Italian winter in wartime. In those first two months of active operations on the **Sangro** NZASC drivers learned a great deal—and learned just how much they still had to learn.

The main roads were not so bad, but transport often had to pick its ways along by-ways that were designed for nothing heavier than horse traffic. Demolitions, mud and general congestion hobbled movement; parking off roads—always necessary—courted trouble as vehicles sank into the soft ground and had to be manhandled back. Looking back over the first few months in **Italy**, Major Bean recommended to Headquarters NZASC in January that each platoon should have a recovery vehicle attached—say a 25-pounder quad or a Bofors tractor.

In spite of the difficulties, the supply organisation operated better in **Italy** than it had in **Egypt**. The reasons are various: the Division was less mobile, railheads and bulk issue depots were nearer the front line, maps were more reliable and the country easier to navigate in.

But transport nevertheless remained a thorny problem. No longer were the sweeping manœuvres of the desert possible; to move by motor transport the Division had to shuffle in single file along inadequate roads—and there were 4500 wheeled vehicles in the Division, of which the ASC had 1090, more than any other arm of the service.

The magnitude of the task of moving about the roads is graphically

described in the following report by Sergeant Dunne ¹ on a supply convoy's journey while Supply Company was at **Lucera** and the Division was moving up to the line:

We left supply point at 1645 hours 14 November 43. The convoy consisted of eight vehicles, 1 sgt and 15 OR's. We proceeded along **Lucera- Termoli** road, which is an A1 road but having frequent S bends and steep inclines. We arrived at **Termoli** at 2100 hours and carried on another three miles, where we camped for the night. Rain during the night caused the area to soften and trucks had to be manhandled back on to the road. We pulled away from this area at 0600 hours on 15 November. From here on we struck a metal road which, owing to the rain, had become very greasy. Also, we had to contend with convoys both going up to the forward area and coming down. On arriving at the 2 NZ Div Cav area we were delayed for about an hour and a half while they towed their vehicles out of the area. Frequently we were delayed by salvage units that were recovering vehicles that had run off the road during the night. Further delays were caused by at least six demolitions, which were spanned by one-way bridges. From five miles south of Capello on-coming traffic had to be passed in low gear. We later caught up with a very large Indian convoy. Two of the biggest demolitions caused a delay of about four hours while heavier vehicles were being winched up a slope of about 3 in 1. At 1300 hours we contacted 5 Fd Regt, which was our furthest point of delivery. Here we had difficulty unloading supplies as the unit vehicles could not reach the road. At 1530 hours we started on our return journey. Strict black-out was observed and we had great difficulty negotiating corners several of which required reversing to get around owing to demolitions and natural features. The last vehicle came direct to Larino at 1400 hours 16 November. The approximate distance for the round trip was 210 miles.

It was into this sort of country that the New Zealand Division in November 1943 piloted and sometimes manhandled its vehicles and dragged its guns to take its place in front of the Germans' **Winter Line** on the **Sangro**. It had at first been intended to place the Division in

reserve at **Lucera**, but it had barely arrived at this place before a change of plan sent it further forward to take part in Eighth Army's planned attack across the **Sangro**, and thence, it was hoped, to **Rome**. It was ordered to concentrate between **Furci** and **Gissi**, between 5 and 13 Corps, and all going well, to advance to **Avezzano**. The manoeuvre, as a change from 'left hooks', was a kind of 'right cross' directed at the Italian capital. In the long run the New Zealand Division reached **Avezzano**, but it was very much later and by a very different route from that planned at this stage.

Supply Company moved up to **Lucera** on 9 November and promptly began to make itself comfortable again. The New Zealanders at this stage were still treating the Italians with some restraint; later they took possession of houses without compunction, but in these early days they made the best of things in bivouac tents. In the circumstances, every small comfort counted. Camped beneath the walls of **Lucera** castle, 4 Platoon was sent out on an expedition to **Foggia** to find timber to build a cookhouse. It found instead a salvage dump, and returned to camp with very little timber but piles of Italian groundsheets, bivouac poles and packs. Previously there had been two men to each bivouac tent, but as new tents began to mushroom each man became the owner of his own home.

The New Zealand Division's move into the line began on 12 November and continued until 22 November. It was a move made with all the delays and frustrations implied by the conditions, and on 18 November, Supply Column men aver, **General Freyberg** was to be seen directing the traffic of **6 Brigade**.

Supply Company moved forward to Larino on 16 November, and set itself up in an old monastery. But it had barely arrived there before Major Bean went forward again to reconnoitre a new area, and on 20 November the company was off again, this time to **San Buono**, with the supply point at **Gissi**, a small town close to the line and crowded with troops. The supply point was established along the main streets, with the dry goods stacks near the village well, 'where most of the town's women

seemed to spend a considerable time gossiping,' 4 Platoon observed. For the first time in **Italy** Supply Company was near enough to the fighting to see gun flashes along the **Sangro** front to the north. For the first time in **Italy**, too, the men were put into billets, but their stay here was again brief. Pressed by Indian infantry and New Zealand tanks and guns, the Germans south of the **Sangro** had been giving ground, and by mid-November the Indian troops breasted up to the river. Here New Zealand infantry took over and began to probe with patrols across the bitterly cold waters.

Blinding rain and a swollen, swift-flowing river delayed Eighth Army's plans for an attack on the German Winter Line. Crossings were made near the coast on the night of 21-22 November and, nearer the New Zealanders, on the night of the 22nd-23rd by Indian troops. The attack proper got under way at last on the 27th-28th. The New Zealanders secured a grip on the north bank, threw bridges across the river, and day by day inched along the rain-sodden ridges. By the beginning of December they had **Castelfrentano**, and from their line along an east-west ridge were looking across a valley to **Orsogna**. For the rest of December defenders and attackers thrust and counter-thrust as the New Zealanders grappled for **Orsogna**.

Supply Company moved forward at the beginning of December to **Atessa**, where Headquarters was set up in the cemetery, and thence on 13 December to a dispersal area on the north side of the **Sangro** about eight kilometres east of **Casoli**. The supply point, however, stayed on the south side of the river; it began operation in **Archi** railway station on 15 December. And at last Supply Company was settled for a while.

Supply Company's work was now completely changed. It was not possible to send forward a supply column to open a point at some convenient rendezvous behind the lines, and it was not possible to turn back to a field maintenance centre to replenish stocks; precipitous country and congested roads made traffic movement difficult and lack of open country ruled out the FMCs. The best system, it was found, was

to operate a static supply point, and to hold there reserves brought direct from the railhead. The **Archi** point showed that railway stations were admirably suited for this purpose.

At **Archi** supplies were stacked in buildings and yards. Issuing would commence first thing in the morning and finish about midday, and to be on the spot for a prompt issue drivers of many units adopted the practice of coming back the previous night and sleeping overnight.

In mid-December Supply Company was catering for 31,570 troops, of whom 19,216 were New Zealanders, 3096 Royal Artillery, 4082 from 17 Infantry Brigade group, 2323 from 2 Paratroop Brigade, and the rest an assortment of Canadian, South African and English troops, some Basutos, one or two **RAF** men, 219 muleteers, and 1300 others. On one day a record three-day issue was made—more than 90,000 rations.

Supply Company, too, did not rely solely on the army's lines of communication for supplies. In a fertile country it was possible to draw on the land, and a local resources officer, in the person of Lieutenant Nelson, made his appearance. His primary task was to buy fresh vegetables and fruit, wood and charcoal. To aid him in his task, **Nelson** had a book, handed down from Eighth Army, which gave him 'Instructions with regard to requisitioning procedure in occupied enemy territory', and which stepped off on a fine idealistic note: 'The ancient right of an invading army to plunder property in enemy territory no longer exists and strict rules as to the rights over such property have been laid down by the Hague Convention.' It then set out in detail the various methods of legally acquiring things from the enemy, complete with price control formula.

The principle was, of course, beyond dispute, but in some ways had the effect of turning the conquered into the plunderers. The measure of the Italian's business fidelity was the fantastic prices he charged soldiers for cheaply made souvenirs and third-class wine. In the official field this homegrown inflation was accentuated by the units making their individual bid on the market, so that the local resources officer

sometimes found supplies of some commodity he was seeking already bought out by units at exorbitant prices.

Another hindrance was the remnant fascist element. During the **Sangro** operations **Nelson** was held up with a wood contract for weeks because the local mayor, a fascist, would not permit the contractor to cut from the state forests. The problem was solved by deposing the mayor and installing a man more amenable to the Allied cause.

Thus, for Supply Company, operating at a static base and able to draw some of its needs from the surrounding country, the first Italian campaign provided an easier issuing task than the hectic days of **Africa**.

But, after the spacious freedom of **Africa**, transport drivers found the new conditions a nightmare. Supply Company drivers were spared the work of carrying forward into the tangled and sometimes hazardous country north of the **Sangro**, but there was still plenty to do in country equally as difficult. Crumpled into precipitous ridges and deep valleys, the land permitted only narrow, steep and winding roads, and villages perched atop peaks like rocky outcrops. Demolitions pitted the most difficult sections of the road. Unending lines of trucks, slopping through the liquid mud, wormed up the twisted gradients, through the narrow village streets and around awkward detours. Here it was not merely hazardous to move off the road; it was generally impossible. Precipitous drops were often very close to the slithering tires, and when a vehicle broke down it was sometimes necessary to tumble it over the side. **General Freyberg** himself once, near **Atessa**, ordered a vehicle to be pushed over a bank to clear the road for priority vehicles.

In places the roads were under enemy observation, and use of lights at night was strictly forbidden. Issuing an order endorsing this instruction, **General Freyberg** reminded drivers, 'The Hun shells lights.' The following day a notice appeared on a roadside: 'No lights past this point. The Hun shells lights. By order GOC.'

Amid all this the Italians clung to their homes, or what was left of

them; at **Montefalcone** a detour was blasted through the houses, and elsewhere street fighting had left its mark. Chillies strung along the houses gave a splash of scarlet to a grey scene, and peasants gathered in grapes from vineyards where the Germans had not mined; elsewhere the fruit rotted on the vines. Here and there less happy refugees from the north huddled in forlorn groups.

In these conditions, according to a report filed in January by Major Bean, some drivers showed lack of confidence; they were not competent on greasy surfaces, and they were —understandably—reluctant to drive at night without lights.

It was quickly learned that big convoys became entangled with other traffic and slowed down movement; at road and rail heads there was never enough room to disperse any great number of trucks, and in addition only a few could be loaded at a time from pack trains. The solution was to 'package' vehicles in groups of five, a practice that threw a greater responsibility on lower ranks.

In general, **Archi** provided plenty of work but not a great deal of excitement. An occasional shell—one in particular—that overshot the target of the **Sangro** bridges shook things up a little, and one day Spitfires chased a German fighter low overhead. Otherwise, the Germans were either too busy or too cold and miserable to bother about **Archi** station.

Christmas Day, the Division's first in **Italy**, came cold and foggy. But the supply organisation made a special effort, and there were pork chops all round and an issue of two bottles of beer a man—though the issue was short. Captain Smith, operating the supply point, usually had a sign around somewhere, 'Smith's Busy Corner', and for Christmas he had a huge sign painted along the whole side of the building containing his store, 'Smith's Busy Corner Wishes its Clients the Compliments of the Season.' For its own Christmas dinner Supply Company cleared a big room in a granary, set up tables and decorated them with candles and adorned the walls with appropriate inscriptions.

Hard behind Christmas came snow. As the year ran out, grey-white clouds simmered across the hilltops, and on the night of 31 December-1 January white flakes came cutting down through the darkness. In the morning the countryside was blanched a virginal white; foot-deep snow crunched underfoot and collapsed bivouacs into forlorn hummocks. It was, in fact, a forlorn morning. Many men were cold and wet, and their belongings were saturated. Roads and bridges were blocked, and many poles of the civilian telephone lines used by Signals had tumbled under the weight of snow, bringing down their lines with them into tangled confusion. Supply Company men near **Casoli** who were not already sleeping in trucks moved into billets, and at **Archi** the supply point fell into enforced idleness. With three days' reserves on hand, however, units had something to eat while they dug themselves out.

Snow spattered down intermittently throughout most of the day, and then cleared. As the thaw turned the snow to mud, transport churned the roads into slush. Off the roads the surface was slippery and brittle. Mules were used to carry supplies to units dug in along the tangled hills.

Throughout most of December the New Zealand Division, its operations clogged by mud and cold, had been grinding away at the German Winter Line in an attempt to grasp **Orsogna**. It remained beyond reach, and for the first half of January the men of the Division huddled into their greatcoats and probed forward only with patrols. It had been intended that the Division would remain in position here until the end of January and then withdraw for training. However, the snowfall of the New Year had frozen Eighth Army's plan to drive through **Chieti** to **Rome**. It was decided to strengthen the western sector, and five divisions, of which the New Zealand Division was one, were transferred.

In mid-January the New Zealand Division handed over to **4 Indian Division**, extricated itself from the mud and moved south and then west across **Italy**. The move was accomplished in secrecy and with the usual security precautions to conceal the Division's identity. Supply Company men believed they were returning to southern **Italy**, and some became

aware of their destination only when they saw **Vesuvius's** glow in the night sky.

To move the Division to the west took a week. At the head went an ASC group consisting of Headquarters Command NZASC, Supply Company, **Petrol Company** and **1 Ammunition Company**; this group left on 14 January. Loaded with a bakery pack, composite rations, rum, and empty petrol cans, Supply Company moved out at the bleak hour of 2.25 a.m. The cans were dropped at **Termoli** and 60,000 rations put aboard. The company staged at 12.30 p.m. on the **San Severo- Lucera** road, and when it moved off the next day left 4 Platoon behind with 20,000 rations to supply, if necessary, the divisional units as they passed through **Lucera**. The next leg took the company through the **Apennines**, and on the morning of the third day it reached the **Piedimonte d' Alife** area.

Alife provided a pleasant interlude. The weather was fine and mild, and the olive groves and oak woods formed peaceful surroundings. There was leave to **Pompeii**, and Supply Company organised daily inter-platoon Rugby. On 31 January a Supply Company team beat **5 Brigade** Headquarters 11-3.

The Division's future role, meanwhile, was being shaped. Not far to the north the German forces in **Cassino** blocked the way to **Rome**. They had blunted the nose of every attack launched against them, and while **2 United States Corps** kept up the pressure, **6 United States Corps** and British forces went ashore at **Anzio**, just south of **Rome**, in an endeavour to outflank **Cassino** by a seaborne attack. A bridgehead was secured but was contained by German forces.

During this phase the New Zealand Division was in reserve awaiting a call to the front to exploit the Americans' success. But there was no success. It was now decided to form a strong **New Zealand Corps**, which officially came into being on 3 February. The **4th Indian Division**, which had relieved the New Zealanders at **Orsogna**, was now brought across to join them, and British, Indian and American artillery units and an

American armoured force were added. The corps commander was **General Freyberg**. The Americans gave **Cassino** one last attempt, and then surrendered the sector to the **New Zealand Corps**.

New Zealand Corps moved into the shell-torn country of the **Cassino** front in mid-February, and almost immediately mounted its first attack, preceded by the controversial bombing of the **Montecassino Monastery**. The attack, like so many before it, failed, and a plan for another, code-named **DICKENS**, was put into train. All was ready by 24 February; then down came the rain. The grey clouds curled wisps about the hilltops, and deluged the raw country beneath. Clay turned to mud, bomb and shell craters to lakes, roads to wheel-rutted quagmires. Day after day the Corps waited, and day after day the rain continued.

Throughout this dreary period Supply Company operated as a link between Fifth Army's railhead at **Sparanise** and the forward troops. Trucks would go back to railhead in two groups in the afternoon and come forward to the supply point again the next morning. Issuing began at 8.45 a.m. and finished at 11 a.m. The ration strength varied from just over 27,000 to over 28,000. Charcoal, too, was a major item, and by 17 February 167 tons had been brought forward and 135 tons issued. As the rain softened the ground the engineers were called in to keep the point workable. They laid drains and spread shingle, carting shingle being part of the company's work.

The task of getting supplies forward to the troops was not always such a routine job. Later, when C Company of **24 Battalion** became isolated on Point 202, for instance, their only supplies came from the air. Packed in felt and pieces of blanket and enclosed in a canvas bag, American field rations were parachuted down to this company by American aircraft, though many containers drifted on over the enemy's lines. It is interesting to note that these American rations, which contained various tasty novelties, were in the opinion of these men who had to depend on them for some days, not as nourishing as British rations. Corporal **Cotter**² records that the American rations were most acceptable at the time, but 'we often wished they would substitute bully

and biscuits. These would have been worth six times the number of American units.'

This sort of work, of course, did not involve Supply Company, whose job began at the railhead and ended at the supply point—a dull beat in a static battle like **Cassino**. However, there was always sport with which to break the monotony of these inactive periods. 'As an example of the sports facilities in field units the Company is interesting,' noted an Archives field report on ASC units compiled in July.

The administration corporal from Company Headquarters (a well-known **Wellington** footballer) is also librarian and sports NCO. Under the direction of a sports officer, great interest has been aroused in football inter-platoon competitions, company matches, hockey competitions, tenniquoit and cricket.... The equipment has been supplied by the NZ Nat Pat Fund Board, regimental funds, and a complete baseball set presented by a US army unit.

At **Cassino** the company was camped beside an abandoned airfield, and it was not long before goal-posts were up and sidelines marked. Many games were played here by Supply Company and other units, and quite an impressive who's who in Rugby could have been compiled from the names of men who were seen there.

The carefree manner in which these games were arranged almost within a stone's throw of the front line exemplifies the disdain with which enemy aircraft were now treated. Even when, after **DICKENS** got under way in mid-March, the company moved forward to within sight of the Monastery and the shellbursts puffing around it, transport drivers acted as though there was no enemy within 100 miles. NCOs of the furlough draft, who came back to the unit on 5 April, were mildly shocked to find dispersal ignored and trucks filing nose-to-tail through the supply point. Dispersal was, in any case, impossible because of the surrounding mud. Trucks were driven at night with lights, and when the RASC band gave a concert near Route 6 on 22 March, floodlights lit up the area; not far away gun flashes could be seen, and higher in the sky

Vesuvius's cone tinged the darkness with a white glow.

Even so, the occasional German plane was to be seen, and after there had been a scatter one day when a stray aircraft droned overhead, a man was heard to remark, 'Cor, there's a war on.' On the day of the concert, the sight of eight enemy aircraft overhead was an event worth recording in the war diary; one was shot down by a Spitfire.

But enemy aircraft were not the only aerial hazard. When on the morning of 15 March the weather broke brilliantly fine, American aircraft swarmed across the sky to bomb **Cassino as a prelude to a ground attack, and No. 3 Platoon scattered for cover when bombs came whistling down within half a mile of where it was camped.**

Supply Company's war diary for 15 March reads: '1400 tons of bombs dropped on **Cassino. Sky full of planes all day. Advance began approx 1230 hours. Rations issued 28,500.'**

And that typified the humdrum life of the company during one of the Division's best-known battles. For eight days the New Zealand, British and Indian troops fought a grim battle amid the ruins of **Cassino and on the slopes of **Montecassino** and other nearby features. Rain, the confusion of rubble and gaping craters in the streets of **Cassino**, and above all the fire of a determined enemy hindered and wore down the attack. Most of **Cassino** was gained, but the enemy clung tenaciously to the last fringe, and on the slopes of **Cassino** only a continuous smoke screen made survival possible. At last, on 23 March it was decided to abandon the attack. Isolated forward groups were withdrawn and the Corps settled down to guard what gains it had made. For the New Zealanders this meant holding an uneasy line in **Cassino**; and here they remained, living almost constantly under the oppressive pall of smoke, and suffering the discomforts of mud and water, and the dangers of snipers and an occasional clash, until they were withdrawn in the early days of April. The enemy's **Gustav Line**, barring the way to **Rome**, was still intact.**

¹ 2 Lt B. H. Dunne; **Hamilton**; born **Auckland**, 6 Feb 1922; clerk.

² **Sgt A. B. Cotter**; **Stratford**; born NZ, 28 Sep 1911; draper;
wounded 23 Mar 1944.

SUPPLY COMPANY

CHAPTER 14 – HOVE DUMP

CHAPTER 14

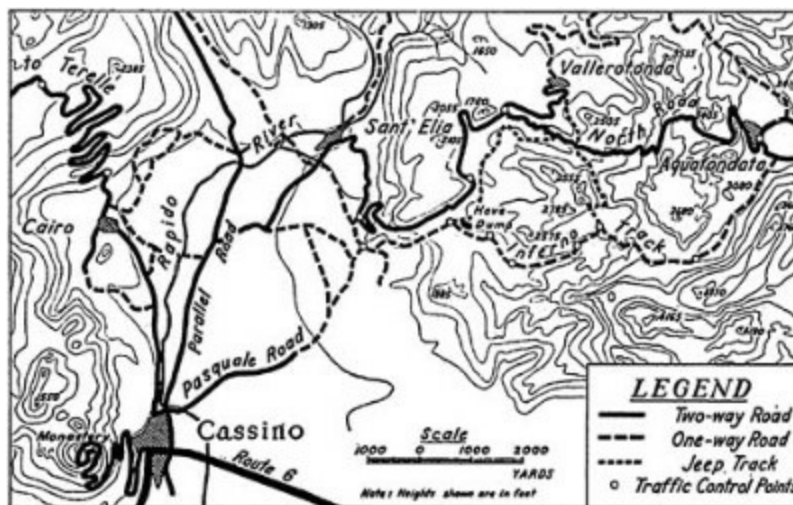
Hove Dump

FOR every moment of glory in a war there are a million more of tedium, fatigue and discomfort, and another million of unremitting, herculean and not particularly glorious labour against the handicaps imposed by the weather, terrain and a watchful enemy. The odd moments of glory go to those who most deserve them—the fighting troops, and in particular the infantry; the herculean labours often fall to the lot of the supply services, who, in devotion to their task, must accept them and for their reward generally take only reflected glory. The tedium and fatigue are common to all. In the month after the New Zealand Division's withdrawal from **Cassino Supply Company, along with other ASC units, had its full share of labour, and if there was no glory to be gained, the work was at least amply spiced with danger.**

When the **New Zealand Corps' assault on **Cassino** failed, Allied forces in **Italy** were regrouped, and the **Cassino** sector was taken over by Eighth Army. The New Zealanders, 4 Armoured Brigade excluded, passed to the command of **10 Corps**, Eighth Army, and after a brief spell at **Presenzano**, moved into the **Apennines**, where **10 Corps** was taking over mountain positions from **2 Polish Corps**. Its task was to protect Eighth Army's mountain flank.**

Thus, in mid-April the New Zealanders fitted themselves into the sangars, cut into the steep mountain slopes, that formed a disconnected sort of line in the heights above **Cassino. Behind this line roads squirmed back in fantastic shapes through the mountains to the dumps and depots from which supplies and ammunition must be brought to the troops. Along these roads was the constant movement of motor transport that goes with a modern army: troops moving in, troops moving out; supplies going forward, empty trucks returning. In the more forward area the enemy could look across to some of these roads from his mountain observation posts and shell any movement he saw, so that a great deal of transport work was necessary at night and without lights.**

The most forward point to which vehicles could go in daylight in comfort was **Acquafondata**. Set in the basin of an old volcanic crater, **Acquafondata** bristled with guns and was alive with motor transport banking up for the run forward under cover of night. From here two roads led forward and down: **North Road**, which was the divisional axis and which most concerned Supply Company, and **Inferno Track**, which was the axis of advance of a neighbouring Polish formation. Of the two, **North Road** undoubtedly best deserved the name **Inferno Track**. The two roads formed a sort of squashed and mutilated O lying on its side: **North Road**, worming along a westerly course from **Acquafondata** (altitude 2700 feet) skirted to the north of a ridge, and **Inferno Track** to the south, the two meeting at **Hove Dump** (altitude 700 feet) in the dry bed of the diverted Rapido River. Both roads were shared by all formations.



New Zealand Divisional Supply Routes in the Apennines
 New Zealand Divisional Supply Routes in the **Apennines**

Inferno Track was shorter and less under the enemy's eye, although dust was likely to bring down shells. But it was wide enough for only one-way traffic, and because of its towering grades—up to one in four—was open only to four-wheel-drive vehicles. A system of traffic control posts controlled movement of vehicles to a bypass area so that spasmodic squirts—they could hardly be called a flow—of traffic went back and forth day and night.

North Road, the principal route forward, was a very different

proposition. Keen eyes across the valley could scan almost its entire length, and it was reputed that the German artillery was so close that the gunners could be seen cleaning their gun sights; actually, at the nearest point they were 2000 yards away, which was quite near enough. In daylight only occasional jeeps and ambulances could use the track, and even darkness was no guarantee of safety. Camouflage nets broke the silhouettes at certain points, but the canvas canopy covers of the three-tonners—still the old vehicles that had spanned half of North Africa—were bleaching white again through the newer darker coat. Supply Company trucks were picked on once and chased up the road by shells for three or four miles.

Theoretically **North Road** was a two-way route, but because of the danger of congestion was used as a one-way road. Its grades were easier than those on **Inferno Track**, but along the 13-mile length from **Acquafondata** to **Hove Dump** there were twenty-one bends that needed two swings, and in the gaping darkness on the right of the road there were drops of up to 400 feet.

Beyond **Hove Dump** the divisional axis climbed back another 2000 feet to **Terelle**—the **Terelle** ‘Terror Track’. Another road led to the British forward defence lines.

‘I recollect vividly a Polish jeep train taking the wrong turning and ending up in the bag,’ says Lieutenant **Orange**.¹ ‘So we watched the road all the more carefully.’

Supply Company, command of which had passed to Captain Rawle, promoted to major, was camped at **Monteroduni** and had set up a supply point at **Venafro** and a subsidiary point at **Hove Dump**, where a section was stationed. In addition to its normal day-to-day supply duties, it was engaged in carrying forward supplies, petrol and ammunition to **Hove Dump**, where a snug and supposedly safe depot was being established in the deep, clay-walled gully through which the river once ran.

The first few runs to **Hove Dump** were made down **Inferno Track** and

back by **North Road**. Lieutenant **Kensington** ² took the first convoy, and Lieutenant Fry the second. With windscreens wide open, the trucks snarled down the winding grades, edged along shelves of rock and groped through deep chasms. 'Very little room to manoeuvre vehicles around sharp elbow bends,' Sergeant **Butler**, ³ who took the third convoy down on 24 April, reported. 'DEFINITE LOW GEAR work all through. Conditions only suitable for fully experienced drivers. Track would be unsuitable for three-ton vehicles in wet weather. General wear and tear on three-ton vehicles SEVERE.'

At Hove there was time for drivers to nap for about three hours before west-bound traffic was halted on **North Road** and the east-bound flow started. After the first few runs Supply Company convoys came in by **North Road** with this west-bound flow and returned the way they had come.

The system followed was this. Just before last light vehicles bound for points west were assembled in the **Acquafondata** basin. First in line were the jeeps, which had come up **Inferno Track** during the day, collected supplies at the supply point and were now going forward again along about twenty pitch-black, winding miles to the **Terelle** sector. Next would come vehicles carrying out reliefs, then trucks carrying supplies for the Hove dumping programme—this was where Supply Company fitted in—and then usually a number of Polish trucks.

A normal convoy sent forward by Supply Company consisted of nine trucks—three of supplies, three of petrol and three of ammunition, with the ammunition at the rear. Last of all came the recovery vehicle, Flannagan II. Only trucks that were in 100 per cent order were used, and if a breakdown threatened to cause a jam, the orders were to roll it over the side.

The wait until the last light went from the sky was an impatient time. The **Acquafondata** basin was a restless area; the 4.5S, long toms and howitzers scattered about the basin cracked and roared, and the sound reverberated around the basin and smacked back on the ears like

a whip-lash. The concussion, it was reputed, blew out tent pegs. Occasionally an incoming armour-piercing shot would ricochet around the basin like a billiard ball.

As it became dark the jeeps were released, and the whole winding column ground into motion. Once on **North Road** there was no turning back; peering out under his open windshield, the driver searched for a glimpse of the vehicle ahead, now and then glimpsing a silhouette or catching the sound of brakes squealing. Theoretically vehicles were spaced, but inevitably there was bunching in the straining and twisting on the 'double-lock' corners.

The moon sometimes provided enough light for comparatively easy driving, but on dark or wet nights a white tape along the roadside and a leading jeep were the only aids. One night when troops of 'an Allied nation' were using the road for the first time, movement seemed unusually slow. It was found that, not fancying the hazardous drive without lights, they had placed a man out in front with a white towel around his head, and the convoy was creeping along at walking pace. It was quickly hurried along. A Supply Company convoy on another occasion had covered three-quarters of the distance on the return journey when it came up against a stationary Polish convoy. The drivers, deciding it was too dark to drive any further, were sound asleep and refused to budge until the Supply Company men brandished weapons and threatened to use them.

And so, first in one direction and then in the other, the traffic was kept moving. West-bound traffic was halted at **Acquafondata** at 10 p.m. and the road was expected to be clear at the Hove end by midnight to enable east-bound vehicles to get on their way and be clear of the road at **Acquafondata** by 4 a.m.

Night after night the routine went on: assemble at **Acquafondata**, then away down **North Road**, a sharp pull to the left at the fork at the bottom and a cautious crawl through an olive grove and up a track leading among boulders; a brief spell, then back down the riverbed and

up the long, tortuous road home, a good two and a quarter hours' drive, of which the first two were all climbing. There was generally a hitch somewhere. No. 2 Platoon, turning into **North Road** at the fork one night, came face to face with some Indian jeeps. Before it could stop, the leading jeep had sheared the petrol tanks off the first two trucks. There was nowhere to turn, and to back was out of the question; the jeeps went over the side, a 50 or 60-foot drop. On the night of 26-27 April a convoy led by Second-Lieutenant **Wilson**⁴ was delayed on the down journey by rain and a slow Polish convoy. It reached Hove too late to make the return journey in darkness, and NZ Provost Company, which controlled movement on **Inferno Track**, permitted the return trip by that route. The trucks, the first three-tonners to make the up trip, were sent away at five-minute intervals.

Occasionally there was shelling on **North Road**. The drill was to time each salvo; if the shelling was regular, the convoy would wait until the last group came down and then go.

The Germans, of course, were taking a great deal of interest in all this activity, even though most of it was concealed from their view—the traffic by darkness and the dump by the high walls of the gully. These high walls, moreover, made the dump immune to shelling—or so artillerymen assured the men of the ASC. However, early in May the enemy got a few shells into the dump. The Poles were building up a dump of pyrotechnics at the lower end, where the river bend took a turn to the south and towards the enemy in the general direction of **Cassino**. As their dump grew week by week it began to protrude around the corner of the bend and into the view of a German observation post.

Supply Company men were warming up with a cup of tea before setting out for home one night when there was a shout of warning, and a packet of shells crashed into the mouth of the gully. The pyrotechnic dump went up in grand style. At last, as the fire and fireworks died down, Supply Company men mounted their trucks and were away at 200-yard intervals as though riding Pegasus. Orange, who had led down in the jeep, came out last and, looking up the road, could see red tongues

of flame glowing from the open exhaust pipes as the trucks stormed full pelt up the track in second gear. 'A comet,' says Orange, 'has nothing on a three-tonner with straight exhaust in second gear.' By the time he reached home everyone was in bed. The time for the trip: one hour three minutes, the fastest ever.

This was a foretaste of calamity, a calamity that artillerymen assured the ASC couldn't happen. **Hove Dump** was safe; it couldn't be shelled. This was stated right back at the beginning, and it was with the comfort of this assurance that a Supply Company detachment was dropped here one dark April night and settled down in the open.

Everything was still and quiet (recalls Driver **McGlynn**⁵), and no lights could be seen. Suddenly there was an almighty bang, and we almost jumped out of our skins. It was a 25-pounder right on our back door. It kept firing during the night, and I thought, 'What a queer place to have a gun, almost on top of a supply dump.' The fellow next to me started talking about German counter-battery and spotting gun flashes. I said something about assurances we had heard shortly before of how impossible it was for Jerry to land anything in the gully.

That was how it was: an apparently snug and safe harbour for supplies, lying directly beneath a New Zealand gunline on the heights. In the light of that first morning it looked safe enough. From the flat floor of the old riverbed, the bank rose steeply on the forward side though not too steeply for trees to grow and infantrymen to dig in their bivouacs. The other side, where the supply detachment was installed, was a clay bank, to which scrub clung, and on top was a grassy shelf with trees. The entrance at the lower end was a slit between perpendicular clay banks, and through it the men could look, if it was clear enough, right across to the Monastery and pick out details of rubble and rock.

The dump was packed with men, vehicles and stores—ammunition, petrol, rations, even hay for mule feed. Opposite Supply Company's little nook not far from the entrance were men of **6 Brigade**, and a few hundred yards up the gully the artillery positions. The spring sun was

warming up, and there was about the place a general unpleasant smell of human excreta. Poles, camped nearby, were not very particular about their habits.

In this close atmosphere an efficient supply service got under way, and life soon settled into routine. In the morning the jeep train—jeeps and trailers—was loaded, and supply men listened to the drivers' stories of the nocturnal runs up to the jeep head, from where supplies were packed forward either by men or mules. When they were loaded up, the jeeps moved away to prepare for the night's trip. At night the supply detachment listened for the sound of the **North Road** convoy. Fairly punctually each night the grinding whir of engines came down through the darkness and after a period the bulky trucks lumbered into the dump. Supplies were unloaded, and the men stood around talking over a cup of tea.

To Hove men, the drivers seemed slightly tense, on one night particularly so; it may have been because there was more shelling than usual that night. A driver swung himself into his truck and exclaimed, 'Thank Christ we're getting out of this dump. It gives me the willies.' That may have been premonition, but more likely just nerves. There was quite a bit of talk about the safety of the dump, though some of the infantrymen across the way said they would be glad to see the ammunition out of the way. There could be no denying that, in amongst the artillery and infantry, it was well forward and in a position that could only be justified by an absolute certainty that it was safe from the enemy.

Shells could be heard going overhead, but that was all. One small group of Supply Company men were taking no chances, however, and led and directed by Driver **McGrath**,⁶ a West Coaster who knew something about mining and timbering, **McGlynn** and a man named **Rochford**⁷ scooped out a refuge in the bank near their bivouacs. The entrance was braced with earth-filled ammunition boxes and the roof with branches.

The 7th May was a clear day. The perpetual smoke pall over **Cassino**

was thinner than usual, and the gunners on the heights could see away across to Monte **Cairo**. During the morning shells fell around the artillery positions; the German guns may have been feeling about in an area of known activity, or they may have been lobbing across shots at movement on **Inferno Track** or perhaps at the artillery positions. Whatever their target, the morning passed without damage, and the work went on as usual. The jeep train, preparing for the night's journey, was packed along the gully, and small shell splinters dropped down on the men loading the vehicles.

During the afternoon shells began to drop into the dump. It was impossible, but there they were. Supply Company men took cover, and while shellbursts split the air along the gully, watched and waited to see what was going to happen. What did happen, and in just what order, is hard to fix; as with all such episodes, split-second impressions become confused and blurred, and sense of time distorted. What follows is substantially the impressions of several Supply Company men and others who were there. If some detail is wrong, the general picture is right.

One of the first things that happened, two supply men agree, was that a shellburst engulfed a jeep and a huge column of black smoke—probably from a load of petrol—spiralled up into the clear sky, a fine marker for enemy gunners. There was sudden, feverish activity. Drivers jumped to their jeeps and self-starters whirred. Trucks and jeeps, some blackened by fire, streamed out of the gully to safety.

‘On the opposite side of the gully people were moving, and they were moving fast,’ writes McGlynn. ‘We could hear the click of pick axes as someone on the opposite side dug deeper into the ground.’

There were men running, men making brief, futile attempts at salvage. McGlynn remembered the hole he had helped McGrath to dig, and with Drivers **Nicolson**⁸ and Rhodes he dived for its shelter. Here they crouched while **Hove Dump** burst asunder.

The first lot of ammunition to go up was a signal for the German

gunners to give us everything they had (says McGlynn). I tried to look out of the hole several times but thought better of it when I saw whole 25-pounder shells sailing by from an exploding dump. Great explosions were echoing from the walls of the gully. The small arms ammunition was crackling and whining. And above all this noise we could hear the German shells coming in. The shells were pouring in; they reminded me of a flight of ducks in formation, one on the tail of the other. Our guns lashed back but their effort seemed feeble compared with that of the Germans. Still, it was good to hear them.

Viewed from afar by awed onlookers, Hove appeared as a deep gash in the earth from which billowed smoke and flame and with them shuddering explosions. Even stacks of super-heated bully beef were bursting like small-arms fire.

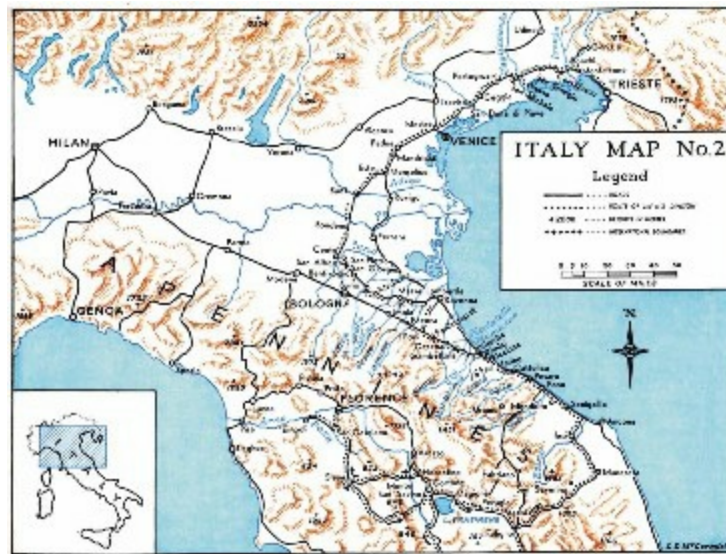
All this was happening just outside the hole in which the three men were sheltering. In a nearby ammunition stack 25-pounder shells were going off with a whoof. The stack of hay went skywards and came down like rain. Then high-velocity 75-millimetre shells burst with ear-shattering bangs, singly and in quick succession like a string of giant firecrackers, each bang followed by a piercing scream.

A small tent outside the hole caught fire, and the flames licked into the tunnel entrance and set alight to the branches bracing the roof. The men wrenched them down and threw them out.

Next to the 75-millimetre shells was a dump of signal flares and canisters, and away they went in a variety of colours like a Brock's benefit. And at last something hit the petrol near the entrance to the gully, and the fourgallon cans burst with a roar and a tower of orange flame and black smoke.

This was an anxious time for us as we were almost certain that the heavy black smoke, if not the flames, would pour in and choke us (McGlynn's account says). We talked about this and decided that if it did we would make a break for it at set intervals and try to get into a

sheltered hollow behind the cookhouse tent. The petrol cans were still flying skywards and burning fiercely, but the smoke kept away from us.



And so the hours went by.

The force of the explosions travelled into the tunnel and hit the back wall. The heat was intense. The earth kept falling down from the roof and we ended up pretty well with our knees under our chins. We ran out of cigarettes and we wanted a smoke badly. There were some in the remains of the bivvi outside, and I crouched just inside the entrance of the tunnel ready to make a grab. I tried a few times but there wasn't much hope of putting out even a finger—there was a storm of thudding metal outside. We scratched around the earth of the floor for a few butts we threw there earlier on, but by now they were well buried. We talked on all sorts of things, all the time wondering when we would get out of the hole.

As dusk fell the glare and scintillation of pyrotechnics filled the night sky, and the shelling kept on. It was five hours before the German gunners felt their job was done. The explosions in the dump gradually diminished, and after a while the heavy explosions died away, though small-arms ammunition continued to crackle.

As the show began to give out, McGlynn looked cautiously out of the hole. The men shouted some abuse at figures they identified as Polish soldiers poking around among the ashes. They did not appear to hear,

and moved on out of sight. A few minutes later two dark shapes were seen bending over the remains of the bivouac. Believing them to be further looters, the men in the hole let out a further shout of abuse. One of the figures straightened up, and a head was poked into the hole. An unmistakably New Zealand voice made an inquiry about three missing supply men.

The two men, machine-gunners, were having a look around, partly to see what had become of McGlynn, Nicolson and Rhodes, who had been given up as lost. They were also keenly interested in the chances of survival of the rum.

‘I thought it funny—and typically Kiwi,’ says McGlynn. ‘We pointed to the place where the rum had been, right next to the petrol store. “Just our luck,” they said.’

The Supply Company men were given a meal and cigarettes at the machine-gunners' cookhouse. Later that night McGlynn had another look at [Hove Dump](#).

The whole place was a smouldering, charred mess. The odd 303 bullet would whizz by and the odd tins of rations would go pop. The ground was hot to walk on. I poked around the old bivvi sites, but there was nothing I could salvage. I was lucky to find a precious souvenir, and that was hot to handle. The dump had been completely shelled and burned out.

And that, as far as Hove was concerned, was that. But though the dump was wrecked, the supply work had to go on, and jeeps that would normally have loaded there loaded that night direct from three-tonners at [Acquafondata](#). Thereafter [Acquafondata](#) became the most forward dump.

¹ [Capt D. R. Orange; Christchurch; born Wellington, 11 Aug 1916; salesman.](#)

² Maj G. S. Kensington; born NZ, 9 Aug 1919; agricultural student.

³ Sgt A. B. Butler; born NZ, 1 Nov 1917; motor trimmer.

⁴ Capt H. A. Wilson, m.i.d.; Christchurch; born Lyttelton, 3 Jan 1914.

⁵ Dvr M. B. McGlynn; Wellington; born Ireland, 2 Jul 1913; civil servant.

⁶ Dvr M. McGrath; born NZ, 13 Jul 1918; machinist and sheetmetal worker.

⁷ Dvr F. J. Rochford; born NZ, 8 Oct 1910; bushman.

⁸ L-Cpl T. B. Nicolson; Wellington; born Scotland, 1 May 1919; clerk.

SUPPLY COMPANY

CHAPTER 15 – ROME AND FLORENCE

CHAPTER 15

Rome and Florence

AFTER Hove Dump went up in smoke there was nothing else to do but start afresh elsewhere. An ammunition dump was built up at **Acquafondata**, and supply points were operated at **Venafro**, as before, and at **Acquafondata**; at the latter point supplies went straight off the three-tonners to waiting jeeps and mules.

Down on the lowlands, meanwhile, preparations had been under way for yet another assault on the stubborn bastion of the **Gustav Line**, operation **HONKER**. An hour before midnight on 11 May the New Zealanders in the mountains saw the stabbing flashes of gunfire flicker across the plains, and the sound of battle began to roll. Apart from feint attacks, the only part played by the New Zealanders in this assault was taken by 4 Armoured Brigade and New Zealand guns. **Cassino** was attacked on 18 May; but the enemy had already gone. By 25 May the **Gustav Line** was broken, and the Allied forces swept forward towards **Rome**.

Fifth Brigade, which had relieved **6 Brigade** in the line, began to probe forward. In this final advance on **Rome** the New Zealanders had only a minor role to play and their battles were mere skirmishes with an enemy intent on retreat; yet there was something sublimely satisfying in the operation. The New Zealanders had, by their earlier efforts, contributed much to the final success, and when the whole thing was done the men were able to look over not only a local victory here in **Italy** but also the unfolding of the Allies' vast plan to recapture **Europe**. Like October 1942, June 1944 marked a clearly discernible twist of the screw on **Hitler's Germany**.

Pushing forward through the mountains, **5 Brigade** cleared **Terelle**, **Belmonte** and **Atina**, and the winding line of vehicles and guns growled across the Melfa River bridge and out along the dusty road threaded across a broad, mountain-enclosed plain. A German rearguard in the hilltop village of **Brocco**, dominating the approach to **Sora**, was driven

out; after further fighting the Maoris, accompanied by armour, entered **Sora** on 31 May, and after a further action by **23 Battalion Sora** and its surroundings were firmly held.

At **Sora** the road along which the New Zealanders had come emerges onto Route 82, which curves up the upper **Liri Valley**, closely following the river. Up this road the enemy was now withdrawing, and after him went the New Zealanders. Green hills crowded in on either side, and at **Balsorano** an escarpment offered the enemy a convenient place for another rearguard stand. For four days here attackers and defenders bickered at each other.

Supply Company, all this while, was following up at a more leisurely pace. During the first days of the advance it stayed put at **Monteroduni**, operating its supply points as before. It was a routine and quite colourless task that required so little effort that Supply Company men found time, while **5 Brigade** was inching gingerly forward towards **Sora**, to go mountaineering on 27 May, hold sports next day (Company Headquarters and Workshops combined won with 18 points, No. 1 Platoon was second with 17), and entertain the Prime Minister, Rt Hon P. Fraser, at lunch on the 30th. About eighty ASC officers attended this luncheon, provided by Supply Company in the Field Bakery area.

During the afternoon Mr Fraser spoke to the men of Supply and Petrol Companies. Rather rashly he forecast the end of the war by Christmas, but in spite of this miscalculation he gave a lucid and candid account of affairs at home and abroad. With the old campaigner's skill, he anticipated his critics and in general cleared up doubts and misunderstandings. He could make no promises, but his address was informative, and though he faced a cynical audience, there were few at the end who did not applaud.

The supply point was moved forward to Sant' Elia, on **North Road** beyond **Hove Dump**, on 30 May, and on 1 June Supply Company collected up its stocks and moved down **North Road** for the last time. It staged at Sant' Elia, then on the 2nd moved on through **Atina** and

across the plain, along a road congested by refugees. About 9 a.m. it pulled into paddocks flanking the **Atina- Sora** road where wide, deep ditches forced nose-to-tail parking. Shortly after 11 a.m. shells, unmistakably 88-millimetre, came whooshing in from, of all directions, the north-east. The target appeared to be the road junction. There was a prompt scatter and no small 'flap'. Several **Petrol Company** trucks nearby went up in flames; splinters sliced through **Supply Company** trucks, and Captain **Fenton**¹ was slightly wounded.

After a 40-minute dose, the gun left them alone, but at 4.30 p.m. orders were issued for all platoons except No. 4 to return independently to Sant' Elia. The gun or guns, apparently either bypassed or in a bulge in the line on a higher inland road, gave the supply point another dose next day, and No. 2 Platoon, bringing forward that day's lift, had just pulled into the area when a stack of spam, on which a few minutes previously No. 4 Platoon men had been leaning or reclining, was blown far and wide. That was a most useful shell; many a stock deficiency was written off against it.

The company moved forward on the 4th to a new area near **Alvito**. Its welcome was a violent thunderstorm that brought down hailstones as large as almonds, and torrential rain. The Alvito area was one of the most uncomfortable points encountered by **Supply Company** in **Italy**. Deep ditches hindered movement and dispersal, and 50 yards or so to the rear a battery of 5.5s was pumping out shells. Aerial reconnaissance could not locate the offending enemy guns of the previous days, but drivers took no chances and employed camouflage nets and all available cover to conceal their vehicles.

But whatever its operational drawbacks, the country here was picturesque—a treat for the eyes of anyone who cared to stroll up to one of the villages perched along the heights. The corn, almost ready to harvest, laid mats of varying green and gold across the fields; cherry trees, olives and vineyards splashed other shades across the scene, and through it all twisted a gleaming river.

In the **Liri Valley** the Division continued to pester the enemy at **Balsorano**, and on 6 June the German force again quietly faded away. Sixth Brigade took over the advance and, delayed only by demolitions, pushed on to **Avezzano**, on the main **Pescara- Rome** road, the prize for which they had fought so bitterly in the **Sangro** campaign the previous year. The prize became theirs on 9 June; they had come a long way round, but in the end it was an easy victory. From the surrounding hills came hundreds of prisoners of war of all nationalities, including New Zealanders, many of whom had been at large since their escape or release from prison camps at the Italian armistice the previous September. Some brought wives and a growing family.

While the New Zealanders had been engaged in their unspectacular task of sweeping up the tail-enders of the retreating German flank, momentous events had been happening. On 4 June the Allies drove into a royal welcome through the streets of **Rome**. And then early on the morning of 6 June came the news for which millions throughout the world had been waiting. In flat, impersonal tone, a **BBC** announcer informed his listeners: 'Under the command of General Eisenhower, Allied naval forces commenced landing troops in northern **France** this morning.' Just that. But it was enough.

For the New Zealanders, in the summer warmth of the green Italian countryside, it was a pleasant note on which to fall back for the first real rest of the campaign. The Division moved down the **Liri Valley** to **Arce**, where Route 6, from the south, met Route 82. The ASC area was set back some distance, near the **Liri**, but the replenishment area bordered the main road opposite 5 and 6 Brigades.

Here, in peaceful surroundings, the Division rested and trained. There was leave to **Naples** and, of particular interest, to the beautiful island of **Ischia**, off the Bay of **Naples** and north of **Capri**. The island holiday scheme was made possible by Lieutenant Commander McLennan, RN, who had visited New Zealand some years previously and had a special interest in New Zealanders. Four hotels were requisitioned,

and for a nominal sum a brief but welcome holiday could be enjoyed on this 'island of wines'. The scheme actually commenced as early as May, when Supply Company provided the rations and Lieutenant **Grant**² and ten Supply Company other ranks were the administrative staff. In late June Ammunition Company took control.

During the Italian campaign Supply Company had a host of duties thrust upon it that seemed to wax and wane in complexity. June 1944, and especially the spell at **Arce**, was a definite period of waxing. In the old desert days the company had a reasonably straightforward role that involved drawing rations from a base supply depot, carrying forward and issuing. In **Italy** at one time or another, wood, coal, charcoal, fresh fruit, vegetables, ice, **YMCA** goods and hospital comforts found their way into issues, and of course there was the task of buying some of these on the local market. And not only had New Zealand troops to be fed, but in **Italy's** cosmopolitan battleground there was generally an array of various nationalities who required rations, usually of a different type from the normal British issue. When the New Zealanders entered **Avezzano**, escaped prisoners from the various Commonwealth countries and from **America, Russia and India** had to be fed. German prisoners required rationing, and at **Arce** there were *carabinieri*, mule pack transport companies and refugees to cater for. The New Zealand Forces Club at **Rome** required 900 fresh rations daily—transported there by Supply Company—and the fresh vegetable run was a 210-mile turnround to **Naples**. By collecting the fresh vegetables itself the company estimated that it would receive them three days earlier than if they were brought by rail; on this reckoning they would be three days fresher, but in the heat of the long drive forward, alas, they inevitably withered.

The refugees presented a problem not only of feeding but also of transport. Pushed into the path of the advancing Allies by the Germans to clutter the roads, they came back to **Arce** so dazed that they couldn't even move off the road for traffic. The first trucks on the vegetable run to **Naples**—three trucks daily—took a complete cargo of pregnant women. One who intimated that time was running short was assigned to

Driver Anderson for special care. Anderson later swore that he felt every bump on the 100-mile drive, and returned looking appreciably older. In all thirty truck-loads of shabby, dispirited Italians were carted back before it was realised that they were verminous and that contamination of trucks was likely. Trucks were deloused and disinfected, and the transport service ceased.

The Allied forces were now approaching **Florence**. The enemy's next main defensive position was the **Gothic Line**, which straddled the Italian peninsula from Massa on the west to **Pesaro** on the east, cutting a line just north of **Florence**. He was shielding this line with a series of strongly held positions south of **Florence**. The New Zealand Division was called forward in July to assist to clear away these obstacles as quickly as possible to deny the enemy the best use of the **Gothic Line**.

The Division began its move forward in secrecy on 8 July. Travelling forward in stages via **Civita Castellana** and **Perugia**, Supply Company established itself on 13 July near **Cortona**. On the same day **6 Brigade** infantry was moving into its first attack in this new phase. This again was a very limited battle for the New Zealanders. Hill positions were cleared of the enemy and the Division was placed back in reserve on 16 July. As Eighth Army's advance continued towards **Florence**, a general line along Highway 2 on the left flank was chosen as the best way to approach the city; the New Zealand and South African Divisions were to drive a wedge through to the River Arno south-west of **Florence**. When the New Zealand Division took over from the French Moroccan Infantry Division on 21–22 July it found the Germans holding good defensive country in which high, wooded hills dominated the roads. Aided by New Zealand tanks, **5 Brigade** began to push north-east towards Casciano.

Supply Company moved up to an area near **Siena** on 23 July and began to send back convoys along the winding dusty road to 6 BSD at **Arezzo**. This base supply depot was a vast depot in an old Italian barracks, and to load up trucks were backed through long rows of stacked rations, an operation that took all day. The turn-round distance from supply point back to supply point was about 50 miles. Trucks were

sent back to **Arezzo** in the evening to be ready to begin loading promptly the next morning; the following night would again be spent at **Arezzo**, and on the third day the convoy would wind back through the hills with the dust billowing up from the wheels and settling over everything in a thick, white blanket.

Retreating slowly, the Germans now fell back to the **Paula Line**, based on a semi-circle of hills around **Florence**. Casciano fell to the New Zealanders on 27 July, and immediately there began a building up of artillery ammunition. Every Supply Company truck that was not engaged in uplifting the day's pack was pressed into service to carry 25-pounder ammunition to **1 Ammunition Company's** supply point. It was a rush job done in rush style. There was no definite check on loads; vehicles merely loaded up and carried forward. The work was completed by the end of the month.

The New Zealanders now struck directly through the hills towards **Florence**, and as the Germans counter-attacked in an effort to push the Division back across the **Pesa**, artillery capable of firing 40,000 shells a day was directed on them. The Allies moved forward slowly, spasmodically; hilltop by hilltop the Germans contested the advance, but on 3 August New Zealand infantry looked down from the last line of ridges towards the River Arno. The Paula Line was pierced, and as the enemy pulled back with alacrity, the South Africans on the New Zealanders' right were able to push forward and enter **Florence** on 4 August. Some New Zealanders, too, drove down to meet a wildly enthusiastic welcome.

The honeymoon was brief. The chatter of machine guns on the north bank of the **Arno** rudely cut into the celebrations, and it soon became evident that the enemy was defending what of **Florence** was now left to him—the half on the north bank of the river. Canadians now took over the New Zealand sector, and the Division was sent west along the **Arno** to tidy up.

Supply Company had moved forward to **San Donato** on 26 July and

found conditions here much more to its liking. **Cortona** and **Siena** had been hot and stifling; at **San Donato** it could relax under the shade of oaks, filled, so the war diary recorded, 'with birdsong at sunrise and sunset.' But the most delightful area, it says, was near **Florence** where the company moved on 4 August:

Here, surrounded by plum, apple, peach and pear trees, laden with ripe and ripening fruits, a sleepy satisfaction was achieved by most folk. Gentle, cool breezes fanned the banks of meandering streams, flanked by tall poplars. Bathing in clear pools, haunted by dragonflies, and cricketing in ideal surroundings were pastimes regrettably missed when the Company returned to the hot and dusty areas near **Siena**.

Having cleaned out odd pockets of Germans on the south bank of the **Arno**, the Division was withdrawn to **Castellina**, north of **Siena**, on 14–15 August.

Here on the 24th **Mr Churchill** visited the Division. Security precautions for his visit included the clearing of the main road, making it necessary for Supply Company vehicles, which normally went through the outskirts of **Siena**, to make a detour of seven or eight miles. When the Prime Minister had passed through on his way north, however, traffic was again permitted to use the main road. It is in the nature of things that a Supply Company lorry, just clearing **Siena**, should choose this time and place to cast a wheel and flop down squarely across the road, broadside on. About a quarter of an hour later a provost-laden jeep came down the road, with the great man in a car behind. For the great all things are possible, and on its three wheels the truck was driven off the road. **Mr Churchill**, puffing his customary cigar, gave the V sign as he drove by.

¹ **Maj J. D. Fenton**, MBE, m.i.d.; **Wellington**; born Waitara, 24 Jul 1912; foreman motor mechanic; wounded 2 Jun 1944; DADME Central Military District 1947-.

² **Lt J. B. Grant, MBE; Patea; born Nelson, 15 May 1917; assistant works manager.**

SUPPLY COMPANY

CHAPTER 16 – ON THE ADRIATIC COAST

CHAPTER 16

On the Adriatic Coast

AND so at last the Allies were hard against the **Gothic Line**, considered one of the most formidable in **Europe**. Its main strength lay in the immense depth of the mountain fortifications; on the east coast a 30-mile broad belt of fortifications utilised low foothills and a close network of canals. It was to the east that the New Zealanders were now sent.

This again was a secret move. As a preliminary, large quantities of supplies were moved across beforehand, and Supply Company was left with just enough vehicles to maintain its day-to-day duties by working all day and every day. No. 2 Platoon was also sent ahead to pick up rations at **Arezzo** and set up a supply point at **Foligno** to replenish units as they passed through.

The Division moved across to the east late in August. The route, along which had been posted 800 fernleaf directional signs, took convoys along the dusty roads that wound through rugged hills and steep, twisting gorges. The road through the **Fabriano** gorge had been bombed, and the Bailey bridges that had been used to span the craters had been taken elsewhere. Convoys, which travelled mainly at night, had to feel their way along a five-mile, one-vehicle-width road at this stage, nosing down into craters and straining out again with storming motors.

While a small New Zealand artillery, infantry and tank force was sent forward to aid **3 Greek Mountain Brigade**, most of the Division relaxed on the picturesque Adriatic seashore. Supply Company moved into **Iesi**, where replacement of trucks that had been going on in dribs and drabs since July was completed. If anyone has a mind to inquire into the durability of modern motor vehicles he might well make a study of the New Zealand Division's transport during the Second World War; Supply Company's would serve as well as any. The vehicles with which the company reached **Iesi** were, in the main, those with which it had

been issued in **Egypt** three years earlier. Three years is no great age for a road-bound civilian truck, but these army vehicles had been subjected to stresses and strains that would long ago have led less robust trucks to the scrap heap. Through desert heat, across trackless wastes, up winding mountain roads, through rain, mud and sometimes snow, these vehicles had carried, day in and day out, food and later fuel for almost 20,000 men, sometimes for more. It was a constant, unremitting task that often called for hard driving and long hauls, and which rarely permitted the coddling considerations granted civilian transport.

It is true that to some extent these vehicles were almost like the old and trusted battle-axe that has had half a dozen new handles and a new head or two—almost, but not quite, because although new engines, new tires and sundry new parts were fitted, the frame into which these things fitted—the shape and tangible evidence of the original trucks—survived the wracking of these thousands of miles and went with the newer parts to the scrap.

The prospect from a workshop point of view must have been appalling. The credit for keeping these old and trusted vehicles mobile goes, of course, to the Workshops Platoon, the sort of backroom boys who, by the nature of their work, came even less into the limelight than the transport or supply platoons. It was their task to patch up the effects of age and misuse. The strength of the platoon, including one officer, was forty-four, of whom about half were technical men and the remainder administration staff, learner fitters, and so on. In September 1944 only one man in Workshops had served his civilian apprenticeship as a mechanic. Two others were coppersmiths and another a turner. The rest had all learned the trade in the Army.

Their main responsibility was the 200 vehicles of Supply Company, which had to be not only repaired but also periodically inspected. In addition they serviced the vehicles of 2 Field Bakery Section, 2 **Divisional Postal Unit**, which was attached, X Water Issue Section, and at one stage 359 Pack Transport Company, RASC, which was also attached. In practice they did work for anyone handy. No job was

considered too big and none too small; repairs were made to 10-ton lorries and to small instruments used by the dentist.

The men in Workshops worked to a more or less civilian routine, only rather longer; their day began at 8 a.m. and finished at 4.30 p.m., and there was a half-day break on Sundays for cleaning up and doing their washing.

The trucks that replaced the old desert vehicles had to measure up to exacting standards, and in many respects they were no match for their predecessors. Though they had a ruxel gear—a two-phase gear-box that doubled the number of gears—they had only two-wheel drive and were useless off the road. They were also unstable; if not correctly loaded they would sway badly—several overturned—and even roll off their tires. Even so, they were husky workers, and their redeeming feature, of course, was that they were brand new. There was still time before the strenuous days of the advance on Trieste to discover their mechanical idiosyncrasies, and when the crucial test came and every wheel was needed, Supply Company transport was 100 per cent efficient—every truck was on the road, and stayed there. Despite their constructional advantages, the time-worn desert trucks could not have given this service.

The ration situation at Iesi became rather complex. Among the units that turned up with the rest of the Division after the trek from the west were Advanced Base 2 NZEF and 1 NZ General Hospital. The general hospital, which had previously always drawn from base supply depots or some such line-of-communication formation, had not previously called on Supply Company for service, and by the nature of its ration strength it was a fastidious client. Hospital ration requirements naturally could not match normal troops requirements, and though advance notice could be given for some special items required, each day additional demands were made, forcing Supply Company to draw from its reserves and replace the next day from a base supply depot. It was finally agreed that it would be more satisfactory if the hospital drew from a more static

depot, and the change was made on 16 September.

On 11 September a New Zealand artillery group moved north of **Pesaro**, and convoys were sent forward daily with rations in detail. Sixth Brigade followed next day and was similarly rationed.

While the company was at **Iesi**, too, two convoys were sent back down the coast, through the so familiar country of the **Sangro** to **Bari** to pick up Patriotic parcels. The score: blowouts, seven, miles by each vehicle, 750; parcels, 21,000.

The New Zealand Division completed its move back into the line in mid-September and began a slow slogging match in which the force of every punch was cushioned by mud, ditches and a well-organised defence. In just over a month's fighting the New Zealanders inched forward from the bridgehead over the Marecchia River, which they took over from the Canadians, to the Savio.

Nos. 2 and 4 Platoons and Workshops of Supply Company went ahead on 14 September and No. 4 Platoon opened up a supply point at **Cattolica**. Two men who will remember this move very clearly were the drivers who took the water cart in search of the water point, Drivers **Westrupp**¹ and **Harvey**,² who encountered a hazard unique in Supply Company's history. Having found the point, they were returning to the company area when they were halted by an elderly woman, who gave them a note reading: 'The bearer's daughter is very ill. Will you please supply transport to hospital.' It was signed by an AMGOT (**Allied Military Government** of Occupied Territory) officer.

After some difficulty, the men found the house where the patient lay, at the end of a long, winding lane through the hills. In a dungeon of a room they found the patient in what Harvey describes as her 'unadorned glory' awaiting the services of a midwife. As far as they could make out, the assembled family that had greeted them thought they were doctors.

After being treated with wine, the drivers agreed to transport the

patient to a hospital, and mother and daughter piled in with the two men in a cab designed for two; water carts lack reserve room. At **Pesaro** no accommodation could be found for a maternity case, and the truck drove on 12 miles to **Fano**. The situation was delicate and becoming critical. A military policeman directed the truck to 19 British Casualty Clearing Station, but here a lance-corporal who came out to see if there were wounded on board told the men to 'Get to hell out of here.' Another MP suggested they try the town major; he was located after a long search but was no help. Moving now from the critical to the desperate, the situation was at last saved by a civilian who, seeing the men's plight, jumped on to the running board and directed them to a civilian hospital. Here they gingerly let down their fragile cargo and departed under a cloud of ' *Grazis*', having added, had they cared to think about it, another service to Supply Company's long list of extracurricular activities.

On 17 September Supply Company moved up the coast road—Route 16—to **Cattolica**, and camped in an area surrounded by barking 3·7s, which were firing into the **Rimini** battle zone nine miles away. The guns moved on with the battle, however, and in its area, flanked by Route 16 and overlooking the blue Adriatic, Supply Company became peacefully settled. 'The cooks,' noted No. 1 Platoon's diarist, 'once again have the oven in action, food is good and all ranks are happy.' Leave to **Florence** began, there was a fresh outbreak of Rugby, and the sea was available to anyone who cared to walk down for a swim.

All was not sweetness and light, however. No. 5 Platoon was sent forward to **Rimini** on 28 September to set up a more advanced supply point. The allotted site looked too soft for a secure supply point, and doubts were soon confirmed. The platoon had no sooner established its camp than the rain came pelting down and the ground became a sea of mud. When the convoy arrived with the rations, the officer in charge rightly refused to take his trucks off the road, and he went back to Supply Company with them still loaded. No. 5 Platoon, left to soak in the mud, spent a miserable night, and with the rain still pouring down

abandoned the site next day and sought shelter in nearby deserted buildings.

Nor was this the worst. No. 1 Platoon's recorder, who had a sharp eye for things that mattered, winds up the month's account with this: 'The month ends with the platoon sadly contemplating their newly painted vehicles. The paint so indiscriminately sprayed about is said to be blue, or maybe just drab.'

During this time the fighting units had been pushing forward ditch by ditch, and the rain that had soaked Supply Company's **Rimini** supply point broke down the pace still further. Driven by gale-force winds, the rain sheeted across the battlefield, bogging down tanks and drenching the unhappy infantry. And through it all the artillery rolled and the troops floundered. At last on 10 October the sun broke through and the advance towards the **Savio** plodded on.

Supply Company sorted out its supply point troubles in the first days of October, and on the 5th No. 5 Platoon opened up at **Viserba**, three miles north of **Rimini**. Here, beneath a roof and on a concrete floor, was one of the best ready-made points encountered by the company in **Italy**. For administrative purposes, the Division and the few British and Canadian troops also being rationed by Supply Company, were virtually static, and for most of October the point operated undisturbed at **Viserba**. The **Savio**, the limit of the New Zealand advance, was less than 20 miles away.

Having reached the **Savio** the New Zealanders were withdrawn towards the end of October and sent back to the **Fabriano** area, deep in the **Apennines**, for a rest. Well, a rest at any rate for the men who most needed it, the fighting troops. To bring supplies to this area meant long hauls and overnight trips for Supply Company drivers. Most of the company moved back to **Fabriano** on 23 October and immediately No. 4 Platoon opened a new point. No. 5 closed its **Viserba** point the following day and on the 25th waded south through a tide of north-bound traffic. In the narrow **Fabriano** gorge traffic was only one way at a time, and the

last 20 miles of No. 5's journey took fourteen hours.

The Division was well spread, and to shorten the turn-round for B echelon vehicles of 5 and 6 Brigades, No. 5 Platoon was despatched to **Castel Raimondo**, 20 miles away, to open a second point. Fourth Brigade drew from **Fabriano**. Supply Company itself was distributed over a wide area as it was necessary to find firm parking for vehicles. No. 2 Platoon, for instance, was five miles from Company Headquarters, 'which was pleasing to all personnel except the Don R,' noted No. 2 Platoon's diarist.

In a tragic manner Supply Company was reminded at **Fabriano** that the people in whose midst they were living had not so long ago been their enemies and that beneath the surface of the Allies' 'co-belligerents' animosity still remained. Towards the close of October Supply Company was called out for a task requiring all available men and transport: supplies had to be brought from **Senigallia**. Among the men left behind were Drivers **Page**³ and **McFeeters**.⁴ During the absence of most of the company, some Italians came to No. 2 Platoon's cookhouse selling wine. Page and McFeeters bought some, and after only a sip both became ill; the wine, later analysis showed, contained cyanide. Page survived, but McFeeters, who was about to return home on furlough, died.

November brought snow and biting mountain winds, and firewood, stunted oak bought by the local resources officer, became a major item of Supply Company's work. The ration was 2 lb. a man a day, delivered direct to brigades by transport platoons. Rugby, inevitably, was begun, and **2 Ammunition Company** beat Supply Company 18-6.

During September 4th Reinforcement men had gone off home on furlough, and 5th Reinforcement men were now about to leave. Farewell dinners were popular, and 'excellent beverage supplies'—so recorded—'ensured the success of all functions.' A typical menu is that of No. 4 Platoon, printed in colour and headed by Supply Company's insignia, a red-over-green diamond overprinted with the figure 95. The menu, complete with an error made by the Italian compositors, reads:

No. 4 Platoon

1 New Zealand

NZASC

ITALY

Menu

Supply Company

2 NZEF

22 Nov 1944

Crepe oyster soup

Poultry—Roast turkey; duck

Meat—Roast beef

Vegetables—Roast potatoes; potatoes

Peas; cauliflower creamed

Roast marrow

Seasoning and brown gravy

Sweets—Trifle

Savouries—Sausage rolls; cheese straws

Beverages—Beer; Marsala

From 17 November onwards the Division began to drift back to the line. The artillery regiments went first, and other formations followed in groups. While the New Zealanders had been away there had been no substantial change in the position, but there had been some gains; **Forli** had been cleared and Eighth Army was nine miles beyond it on the line of the Lamone River. Here the terraced stopbanks presented the enemy with a formidable defence line.

The New Zealand Division took over from **4 British Division** just north of Route 9—the road passing through **Forli**—on 26 November, and began a sporadic exchange of fire with the enemy. While Nos. 1 and 4 Platoons stayed behind to supply the last units in the **Fabriano** area, the rest of Supply Company, laden with 40,000 rations, moved to **Cesena**, just south of **Forli**, on 23 November on a grey, wet day. The supply point was set up in a shingle yard, and while the rain poured down, more and more shingle was brought forward both for the supply point and platoon areas. Firewood and charcoal—the wood had to be brought up from **Castel Raimondo** and **Fabriano**—made further demands on transport, but fortunately the daily pack was drawn from 131 DID at **Cesena**.

Within a few days the point was moved forward to **Forli** and was opened on 28 November in a former silk factory. **Forli** was still within

range of enemy artillery, which used the chimney of the factory for ranging, and shells came dropping into the town day and night. Enemy aircraft, too, had taken a new lease of life.

The silk factory was a minor show place. Before Eighth Army took over **Forli** it had been turning out silk for parachutes and nitric acid for the German Army. The value of the buildings and plant was reputedly £25,000,000. Its normal staff was 2000. The owner was a Count Orsini Mangelli, an anti-fascist, who had fled to **Switzerland** after insulting Mussolini.

Allied bombs had destroyed a good deal of the buildings and machinery, but an electric power plant escaped. According to a report, German sappers were preparing to demolish this before evacuating **Forli** when the works custodian persuaded them to accept a 4000 lire bribe to leave it intact. They left the explosive charges but took the detonators. The plant, needless to say, was an asset to the Allied forces.

The last New Zealand units were clear of the **Fabriano** area by 30 November, and that supply point was closed and 20,000 reserve rations brought up to **Forli**.

On 29 November Major Bean returned and resumed command. Major Rawle went to Advanced Base on the first leg of his trip home.

Early in December the front, not so far to the north, began to liven up. The New Zealand Division's first tasks were 'Chinese' attacks—simulated attacks with plenty of noise and movement to divert the enemy's attention from real crossings elsewhere. After some brisk patrol brushes the Division at last on 14 December made a thrust past **Faenza**, still in enemy hands, towards **Celle** as part of a general assault. **Celle** was taken and held, after a hard fight, and **Faenza** was secured. A second general attack on 19 December strengthened the gains, and a line against the **Senio River** was established. With **Forli** and **Faenza** now close behind, it was possible to withdraw infantry units in rotation and give them a spell from the snow and mud of the front line.

Back at **Forli** Supply Company's point had caught a small but deadly dose of bombing. Just after 5 p.m. on 10 December three Messerschmitts came skimming low over the town. A Bofors near the railway station belched up coloured tracer; newcomers, who hadn't seen an air attack before, gaped; and the old hands, after a moment of shock after being immune for so long from air attack, went to ground. The planes divided; one went over the town and dropped a bomb on a church; another came down over the square, where about thirty tank transporters were parked. A bomb missed the company's administration building by yards and the transporters as well, and buried itself deep in the soft earth before exploding. The blast killed four or five British soldiers, three of whom were due to return home, wounded a number of others, shattered windows, damaged Supply Company vehicles, tossed debris several hundred yards, and started small fires. The aircraft were brought down. Before traffic could move through the supply point, a bulldozer was required to clear mud and stone from the roadway. This was the company's second to last experience of bombing.

Apart from this intrusion, work proceeded reasonably smoothly. Besides the daily issue of 19,000 to 21,000 fresh rations to New Zealand and other British troops, regular issues were made to Italian troops—sometimes as many as 2269—and an AMGOT unit to feed civilian refugees. Issues to refugees ranged from 400 to 2400 daily. Charcoal, coal and, most important to snow-bound troops, rum were other issues. A check at the end of the war revealed that in quantity at least every drop of rum that passed through Supply Company's hands could be legally accounted for. Whether the addition of water was ever necessary to reconcile the books is something only a few may know.

At Christmas the customary special issues, including Christmas cake, were made. Supply Company dined on oyster soup, oyster patties and chips, roast turkey, pork, roast potatoes, onions, cauliflower, cabbage and mashed potatoes, and Christmas pudding. 'The general expressed opinion,' says No. 3 Platoon's diary, 'is that this is our last army Christmas.'

As 1945 began with the customary pyrotechnics, the front was static and soon the New Zealand Division was preparing to meet an anticipated counter-attack. But none came, and along the frozen front, white beneath several feet of snow, small arms crackled and the guns barked without achieving anything of note. Frosts overlaid the snow with a crisp crust, and rain beat it to slush.

If you ask a man who saw the year of victory commence in this area what his dominant impression was, he will very likely answer, 'It was cold.' How cold? Water just 12 feet from Supply Company's blacksmith's forge turned to ice. Water froze in hand basins; tinned milk and the liquid contents of tinned fruit froze in the can. Graders skimmed snow and ice off the roads and banked it up on either side in a churned, frozen mass. Water in a quarry across the road from No. 1 Platoon froze, and the men, fashioning skates out of angle iron, organised ice hockey.

There were ways of keeping warm—or at least of getting warm. Wood was in such heavy demand that all reserves were exhausted and fresh supplies issued as soon as they were received. Charcoal and coal—coal for hospitals only—were also on the issue, and an earthenware stove factory at **Forli** was pressed into service turning out stoves for the troops. The troops themselves developed their own diesel-oil-fired heaters that operated with a full-throated roar, now and then erupted with a red-tongued flame and a shower of soot, and filled the air with the heavy smell of oil. It is not recorded who first thought of warming up trucks in the same manner, but the very first Supply Company routine order of the year consisted of this one instruction: 'Oil burning, charcoal or wood will NOT be used in any WD vehicles. Disciplinary action will be taken against offenders.'

The **Kiwi Concert Party** helped to liven things up during January; films were popular, and the Dorchester Club Naafi was generally thronged with New Zealanders. The 22nd Battalion and **2 Ammunition Company** fought out the final of the Freyberg Cup Rugby competition at **Forli** stadium; the battalion won.

The routine work went on: the pack from **Cesena**, wood from San Godenzo, charcoal from **Cesena** and **Rimini**. The issues included civilian rations to the Don Bosco hospital, **Forli**, to an AMGOT unit at **Faenza** and the civilian hospital at **Forli**. One Supply Company detachment made the rounds of divisional units distributing vermouth.

On 29 January Supply Company sent back Nos. 2 and 4 Platoons' cookhouses and a water cart to **Pescara** to set up a transit camp for men on their way home on furlough.

By the end of January there was a general desire to be on the move. It is an affliction of the soldier's life that he is perpetually wishing he were somewhere else, and after nine weeks—the longest for which any one supply point had operated during the Italian campaign— **Forli** was stale. Furthermore, the thaw had begun, and mud slopped underfoot.

But there was no move. The front was set fast in the snow, and no relief for the New Zealanders was yet in sight. And so the routine went on. Some, however, escaped from **Forli**'s tedium. Early in February men released on furlough were sent back to **Bari**; Supply Company despatched 188 on the 10th. Of these, 150 were 5th Reinforcement men, thirteen men who had been in the **Pacific** and twenty-five who had been abroad since the echelon days. Among other things, this move stripped the company of all senior NCOs except two sergeants, but platoon commanders had been schooling up lower ranks in anticipation. To fill the depleted ranks about 140 replacements, mainly former members of the disbanded 6 RMT and 18 Tank Transporter Companies, who had been training at **Bari** for the past three months, were posted to the company on 7 February, rather earlier than anticipated. It had been intended to pick up these replacements with the fifty-eight trucks that took south the furlough men, but they dropped out of the blue before the furlough men had gone.

But there was still work for the convoy to do, for waiting at **Bari** were men from the **Pacific**. Coming from warmer climes, they hardly appreciated the dusting of snow they received as they ran north up the

Adriatic coast with only the draughty flapping canopy of a three-tonner to shield them from the biting air. Two officers, a number of NCOs and forty men were posted to Supply Company from the **Pacific** draft, bringing the unit up to strength.

An event of note during February was the marriage of the Senior Supply Officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Bracegirdle. Forewarned of the coming event by the bridegroom, No. 5 Platoon contributed to the wedding breakfast with 'certain extras', undefined.

Relief of the New Zealanders was at last begun on 4 March, and the Division moved back to the mountain rest area it had occupied during November. But now the sting had gone out of the weather; the snow had gone, and though there were one or two light falls they soon disappeared in the spring sun that was warming the mountain valleys.

Leaving Nos. 1 and 5 Platoons to operate at **Forli** until the Division was withdrawn, the rest of Supply Company went back to **Fabriano** and resumed residence as they had left it. The supply point went into the railway station and Workshops into the brickworks. The civilians, who somehow seemed to be expecting them, welcomed them with open arms.

No. 5 Platoon closed the **Forli** point on 7 March. The point had been open for three months and eleven days, the longest period for any one point in the history of the Division.

Two supply points were again operated, at **Fabriano** and **Castel Raimondo**, and a detachment was attached to 4 Armoured Brigade, which had gone to **Cesenatico**. There was plenty to do: the pack three times a week from **Senigallia**; bread and hot cross buns for Easter from **Ancona**; charcoal from **Foligno**; meat, fresh vegetables, fruit, **YMCA** stores and coal from Chiaravalle; eggs (appropriately) from **Ancona**; ⁵ and wood from **Castel Raimondo**, **San Severino** and Porto Civitanova. On top of the ration issues dropped a big parcel mail that had been delayed in the **Indian Ocean**, and Patriotic parcels and cigarettes were issued. On 14 March a full company parade was held in preparation for an ASC

ceremonial parade on the 19th. All ASC units were inspected by **General Freyberg**, and the salute for the march past was taken by **Major-General Kippenberger**.

One way and another there was not a great deal of time, but time enough for Rugby. In the ASC competition Supply Company first disposed of Field Bakery by nine points to five, and went on to meet **2 Ammunition Company** on the Supply Company ground. It was a brilliant game, with Supply Company forwards and backs working smoothly and efficiently. They held the initiative, but when time was called the score was eight-all. To find the winner of the competition a return match was arranged for a few days later, played this time on Ammunition Company's ground. With Wally Argus and Bob Scott in their team, Ammunition Company was a formidable prospect. Supply Company, however, had Jack Taylor, and Tim Perriam was another sound leader. Watched by **General Freyberg** and Brigadier Crump, the teams fought out another draw—three-all. It was decided to play an extra five minutes each way. Taylor lined up his team and briefed them crisply. 'There's only one thing that matters in life or death,' he told them, 'and it's this game.' Accounts differ on just how many minutes and seconds it took Supply Company to score the winning try, but it is agreed that it was a team possessed. Breaking away in a fast movement, the backs swept down the field and touched down while the crowd roared and whistled and waved.

Later in the divisional competition a depleted Supply Company team was beaten by 27 Battalion 6-3 in a hard game. This defeat, however, was no dampener to Bean's pride, which he aired expansively at NZASC Command Headquarters. Command promptly challenged Supply Company Headquarters with the taunt that even with the smaller number to pick from, they could easily beat the company. In the words of the then unit historian, the Supply Company team 'featured such "has-beens" as Major Fenton, Major Bean, Captain Markby and Lt Fergus.' 'Has-beens' or not, Supply Company Headquarters won 9-3, with tries scored by F. Collins, L. Higginson and R. Coombes.

Three men to whom Supply Company owed a great deal for organising Rugby were S. Higgins, T. Quirk and A. Garraway, who formed an active sporting trinity. In hockey, too, Supply Company was prominent and contributed five players to the ASC team.

By the end of March there was little time left for anything—even for Rugby. There was work to do.

¹ **Dvr B. Westrupp**; born NZ, 30 Oct 1918; driver.

² **Cpl G. R. J. Harvey**, BEM; Waipawa; born NZ, 25 Jun 1904; service station proprietor.

³ **Cpl E. H. Page**; born NZ, 26 Jun 1910; commercial traveller.

⁴ **Dvr C. G. McFeeters**; born NZ, 24 Feb 1900; van driver; died on active service 31 Oct 1944.

⁵ **Ancona** poultry are good layers of white eggs.

SUPPLY COMPANY

CHAPTER 17 – THE FINAL ADVANCE

CHAPTER 17

The Final Advance

TIME, especially for the enemy, was running out. From the east and the west Allied forces were squeezing up the last of the German forces in **Germany**; in **Italy** Eighth and Fifth Armies were preparing to deal a blow designed to smash the German forces that might retire to **Hitler's** vaunted last citadel in the mountains in the south of **Germany**. To do this Eighth Army was to hammer with all its power on the enemy's network of river lines on the plains; as the enemy forces were drained from the **Apennines** to meet this threat, Fifth Army would strike through and reach for **Bologna**. It was hoped to break the enemy forces south of the River Po.

There was no appreciable change in the line when the New Zealanders went back at the beginning of April—apart from the fact that it was warmer. The Division, a stronger division now, with three infantry brigades in addition to its armoured brigade, took up a position to the right of its former sector and began a preliminary cleaning-up process. Here it would be the centre division of a three-divisional attack.

The Division's move was again a secret one; hat badges, titles and divisional signs were removed, and the men were not told their destination until the convoys were under way. Supply Company, as usual, went forward in two parts, No. 4 Platoon operating the **Fabriano** point while No. 5, which went forward in moonlight on the night of 30–31 March with Headquarters, No. 2 Platoon and Workshops, opened up again at **Forli**, across the way from the earlier point. For several days only men on duty were permitted to leave the area. Day and night convoys of trucks and all the variety of vehicles used in modern war streamed past along the dusty road. It was clear that something big was coming up.

No two battles during the war presented Supply Company with quite the same problems; there were similarities, and of course basic principles

remained constant, but every fresh turn of fortune—or misfortune—presented the company with an entirely new set of circumstances that called for a different technique. In **Greece** the problem was how to hold the supply organisation together in the midst of a retreat that frequently called away all or most of the company's transport for other tasks. In **Crete** supply work was almost incidental to the main task of fighting. In the second Libyan campaign the company was permitted to give its undivided attention to supplies, but the problem was how to keep the supplies moving through a confused battleground—and how to keep out of the enemy's hands too. **Alamein** was textbook work. But when the advance started the book fell far behind the needs of a division moving across half the breadth of a continent. By contrast, the Italian campaigns to this point were either static or so slow in movement that the company had never been called on to move at more than a leisurely pace; the main difficulties had been terrain and weather—mountains, mud and snow.

And now this new battle was something different again. There was a similarity to the long, swift marches across **Africa**, but it was no longer possible to set a course by compass and strike from A to B like a fleet abroad on an ocean. Here impatient traffic jostled along inadequate roads, and wrong turnings invited convoys to get themselves lost. Further, in the 'left-hook' manoeuvres in **Africa**, the company, like the rest of the Division, had for a period been a self-contained unit; here there was a daily pack to pick up.

While at **Fabriano** the company had got its reserves properly balanced, and when the battle began it had three days' reserves plus the extra day's issues. Divisional units carried similar reserves and rations for consumption next day. The Division could have lived on its fat for a week, but so long as fresh supplies were constantly available it was necessary to maintain that comfortable reserve. Every time the company moved it loaded up 60,000 reserve rations, miscellaneous items for a week, and hospital comforts for a month—and the daily pack. When the company was called on to help with troop-carrying, bridging

and ammunition-carrying, the remaining vehicles and men had to work so much harder, and when the supply point was moved forward two trips were necessary to lift the supply pack forward. As the pace of the advance grew, it became a case of issue today, load and cart reserves and balance of rations forward, unload in the evening, receive and unload the incoming pack in the early hours of the morning, and issue again that morning on schedule—and the 7.30 a.m. deadline was missed only once. Full fresh rations were available at all times and made up most of the issues.

This was the nature of the battle to come—the final and supreme effort. The real work began three days before the start of the attack. On 6 April all available company transport was called out for a host of duties, all in addition to the lifting of the daily pack. The priority job, and the biggest of all, was carrying forward 25-pounder ammunition from **Cesena** to **Ravenna**. Each day for three days sixty trucks were assigned to a double trip; drivers would come home late each evening, snatch a few hours' sleep and be away early next day.

Abruptly on 9 April security precautions were lifted. Hat badges, titles and divisional signs were replaced, **Forli** was again in bounds—and an announcement made that the 'big push' would start that afternoon. There was time for one last diversion before settling down to more serious work. The Leader of the Opposition, the Hon S. G. Holland, and Mr F. Doidge, MP, visited the company. Mr Holland told the men he had been asked two questions by other units: what was the future of the Division when the war ended; and what was happening about licensing laws in New Zealand. He said he did not know the answer to the first; the answer to the second was that there was a Royal Commission on licensing sitting in New Zealand.

Talk of home and of the end of the war was in keeping with the general mood of optimism, and yet it was incongruous, too. Home was getting closer, but it still lay beyond a battle—and for a soldier anything that lies beyond a battle can be counted as nothing more than a dream. For some it never materialises.

The 9th was a clear day, with the dust drifting up from the road. Early in the afternoon the drone of aircraft engines drifted down to the supply point at **Forli**. As it grew, formations of bombers took shape, spread across the sky and roared on towards the **Senio**. Wave after wave went across, and soon the heavy, sustained crump of bombing could be heard. Then fighters and fighter-bombers darted forward. And finally the guns opened their throats, and the windows of **Forli** rattled. Across the **Senio** smoke and dust and unceasing explosions blotted out the country. Hour after hour the bombardment went on, and as it became dark flame-throwers, making their debut, licked across to the enemy infantry positions with long red tongues. And then suddenly the enemy found the infantry upon them. The crossing was made and the battle was on.

Rolling back a torn and tattered defence, the Division had within forty-eight hours penetrated six miles of strongly fortified river lines and by 12 April was beyond the **Santerno**. Massa Lombardo was swallowed up, and on 13 April the Division faced yet another river line, the Sillaro. A bridgehead was seized, and ballooned out against fierce resistance. By the week's end the Division was 20 miles from its starting point and behind it lay twenty German tanks, many of them knocked out by infantry at close range.

Not so far back from the line, Supply Company could hear it all and see a great deal: the bombers droned high overhead, and as they passed the crunch of their bombs came back; fighters sprang aloft from nearby airfields; traffic streamed unceasingly along the roads; and back from the west came bedraggled streams of prisoners on foot. Ragged and dirty, they marched past the **Forli** supply point, singing despite their dishevelment—though their manner suggested that their singing was prompted not by high morale but pleasure at being out of the fight.

Two days after the start of the attack Supply Company set up a temporary supply point in a field forward of **Forli**. Bulk was broken at **Forli** each morning and No. 4 Platoon went forward and issued. On 13 April No. 4 went forward permanently to set up a point near **Cotignola** to

supply forward units; No. 5 maintained the **Forli** point for rear units.

The thundering guns, meanwhile, were swallowing up ammunition, and on 13 April sixty company trucks were assigned to carry artillery ammunition from 501 AAD, **Cesena**, to 154 Field Regiment RA, west of Massa Lombardo. The roads forward were crowded, and near the **Senio** shelling, bombing and the passing of many wheels had cut up the road; large holes and craters were concealed beneath heavy dust. But despite the holes and the traffic, this narrow strip was all that trucks dared to use, for close on either side lay unlifted mines.

At 2 p.m. on 16 April the company was ordered to move to Massa Lombardo; by 5 p.m., having loaded up reserves, Company Headquarters and Nos. 2 and 3 Platoons were following an advance party. The rest of the company stayed to keep the **Forli** and **Cotignola** points operating until the more forward point was opened. The convoy wound its way along Hog Track—all roads were named, as they had been at **Alamein**—to **Villafranca**, across the Montone, the **Lamone** and the **Senio**, through **Cotignola**, bombed and shelled to a ruin, and on towards the **Santerno**. Everywhere there were signs that victor and vanquished had fought bitterly and passed without pausing to tidy up: mine notices gave their stark warnings everywhere; German tanks and self-propelled guns, an assortment of wrecked and charred vehicles, and uprooted trees lay about; mortar, shell and bomb craters scarred the fields, and houses were torn open or reduced to rubble. Over everything and everyone settled a blanket of dust, and with it came the stench of burned and decaying flesh. Here and there groups of Italians picked their way among wreckage, mines and jostling traffic in search of their homes.

Divisional signs clearly marked the route, and Workshops had improvised several of their own a few hours previously to supplement these. Even so six trucks, a sergeant's 'bug' and the LAD truck of No. 2 Platoon went astray just three miles from their destination. They were met by the platoon despatch rider, who had come from the new area to guide them in. But after travelling for about a mile the despatch rider

realised he had lost his way in the dark and dust, and the little group of vehicles groped forward in search of a recognisable landmark. Abruptly a tank loomed ahead, stationary and squatting fairly in the centre of the road; it was, moreover, a Panther. The despatch rider came back in a great state of alarm as he was sure there had been no tank there when he had come down the road to meet the convoy. But there was no sign or sound of movement, and with pistol drawn Second-Lieutenant **Thomson**¹ had a look around and found the tank deserted. The road appeared to be cleared of mines, so the convoy brushed past the tank and went on until it came to a place where transport had previously been off the road. Here it turned and went back until it met an English officer in a Dingo, who pointed out the way. The only trouble now was that a truck, the sergeant's bug and an LAD wagon were missing. They encountered them soon afterwards; the truck had slipped into a shell hole and had to be winched out. By 10.30 p.m. the men were at the new company area, about two kilometres from Massa Lombardo, and were settling down for a night's sleep, 'for which,' noted Thomson, 'we were damned glad.'

There were many that night, however, who did not sleep. All night long the clamour of battle could be heard a few miles to the west, punctuated by the roar of the closer guns. Flares glowed in the sky, and bombs whistled down.

And now the pace was well and truly on. Massa Lombardo was a pleasant little backwater with the fruit trees in bloom and the crops bowing gently with the wind, but there was barely time to glance at this, let alone reflect on it. For on 17 April the **Forli** and **Cotignola** points were closed and their reserves loaded and brought forward. Then there was the day's pack to get from **Forli**, and in addition thirty-two three-tonners were wanted to carry back 3.7 anti-aircraft ammunition to the ammunition point at **Fantuzza**. At **Fantuzza** three trucks went off the road and rolled on to their sides, and for two hours eleven men laboured, with the aid of the winch on the sergeant's bug, to roll them back again. 'The job was completed with much shouting and abuse,' says No. 2

Platoon's diary. 'Lt Johnson produced a bottle of whisky, which was shared by everyone on the job.'

This sort of thing, however, was only incidental; No. 4 Platoon at Massa Lombardo had far more to worry about. Since it had arrived that day it had been flat out stacking reserve rations, arranging the pack and generally preparing for the next day's issue. There was rumour abroad that the company might be moving, and at 5 p.m. came word that it was to be mobile in half an hour. No. 4 Platoon, however, was not disturbed. In a frenzy of haste, Headquarters, Workshops and Nos. 3 and 5 Platoons got themselves ready and moved up along the divisional axis. At the **Sillaro River** crossing chattering bulldozers were nosing out a track over the stopbanks. Nose-to-tail traffic crawled past and along the road beyond, a fine target for enemy planes if there had been any. Everywhere there was the same desolation that had been seen the previous day: wrecked houses, burnt-out tanks, shattered trees and dead mules. The company passed through **Fantuzza** and halted about 500 yards beyond. The enemy had left here only about thirty-six hours previously.

The company dispersed and maintained a strict blackout. The night sky was full of aircraft; guns close on either flank pounded away all night and drew down viciously spitting enemy planes; flares glowed across the country, and shell-bursts winked.

When daylight came, smoke hung heavily. Close at hand houses were still smouldering; what had been haystacks formed heaps of black dust. **Fantuzza's** walls were jagged and crumbling. In the company area were several Panther tanks that had apparently run out of fuel, and some German dead. The Germans were promptly buried, but the smell of dead stock, their bloated bodies putrefying in the sun, was beyond remedy. Battlefields are no place for the squeamish.

In spite of the constant movement, the supply organisation was still working smoothly. No. 4 Platoon issued at Massa Lombardo on that morning while No. 5 at **Fantuzza** prepared to open the new point next

day. A convoy went back to **Forli** for the pack and another fifty vehicles were sent off to pick up salvage from **1 Ammunition Company's** point, take it back to **Cesena** and return with 3.7 ack-ack ammunition.

That night, the 18th, the New Zealand Division threw in another set-piece attack. The guns around Supply Company crashed into yet another barrage, and in perfect weather the next morning bombers and fighters droned forward. Fighters coming home were seen to do the victory roll; the hunting was good. Across the **Gaiana River** the Division pushed on. By the 20th it was up to the Idice River line, reputedly of great strength, and almost before the Germans were aware what was happening the first New Zealanders were across and a bridgehead firmly held. A counter-attack was broken, and the German forces opposite the New Zealanders fell apart. This was the beginning of the end.

But it was only the beginning. Long, gruelling miles lay ahead. The heavy guns moved on from **Fantuzza** area on the 20th, leaving behind them a strange quiet. The supply point continued to operate at **Fantuzza** while the company's trucks were scattered abroad on various tasks: the daily pack and mail, troop-carrying, ammunition and salvage cartage. The roads were bad, the traffic thick and the pace slow, and drivers had little chance of a long sleep or many hot meals.

The advance was now rolling forward to the Reno River. And it rolled on across it and up to the Po, broad and deep, and with banks rising to 30 feet. It was high time for the supply services to be moving again. On 22 April Supply Company sent back a detachment under Lieutenant **Ashby**² to operate a railhead at **Faenza**, and simultaneously Headquarters, Workshops, No. 4 Platoon and some of the transport platoons moved forward 20 miles. The convoy crossed the **Idice** and threaded its way up the dusty road through now familiar scenes of ruin. Dead horses, mules and oxen littered the roadside. Ahead, tanks were rumbling along the road, and the trucks had to crawl patiently behind. Ack-ack fire was sprouting over Route 9, away to the left, but the divisional axis was clear. The new area at **Bagnarola** was reached at 7.45 p.m., and there was time for a quick meal before dark. Then, as red ack-

ack tracer bubbled up into the sky over Route 6, the men set to work to prepare the point for the morning. Just behind the point a gunline came to life, and soon the pulsating drone of enemy planes was overhead.

In moonlight the work went on. Soon after midnight there was time for a spell during a wait for transport with further stores. Under the canopy of a truck a light glowed dimly, and in a moment down came tumbling canisters of butterfly bombs. As they burst and showered the transport lines and the lanes between the ration stacks, men went to earth. Ten men were wounded and Driver **Carbis**³ died on the way to the MDS. The other wounded, who were taken back to **5 Field Ambulance** at **Medicina**, were Drivers **Dickson**,⁴ **Bathurst**,⁵ **Taylor**,⁶ **Roberts**,⁷ **Chapman**,⁸ **Tripe**,⁹ **Toomer**,¹⁰ **Peterson**,¹¹ and Lance-Corporal **Latimer**.¹²

The work—and nearby bombing—went on. More trucks arrived at 2.15 a.m. and were away again by 3.30 a.m. on their way to the **Faenza** railhead for the day's pack. Blearyeyed, No. 4 Platoon began issuing at the usual time of 7.30 a.m. During the day No. 5 came forward with its reserves.

Eighth Army faced up to the Po line in strength on 24 April and began crossings in force next day. Recapturing the spirit of absolute optimism of the late African days, the Army hastened up its supply organisation, and at 5.30 a.m. on the 24th Supply Company, less No. 4 Platoon, moved on to **San Giorgio**, cleared of the enemy only a few hours before. For the first few miles it was the familiar scene of crater-pitted fields and dusty, lacerated roads. Then abruptly beyond **Medicina** it all changed to smooth fields of grass and crops, green, upright trees and an almost peaceful pastoral atmosphere. Both armies had passed this way in haste and without fighting. After the miles of wasted country behind, it was a paradoxical and yet significant gesture that Supply Company, on reaching **San Giorgio**, should take the trouble to hitch up a mower to a jeep and cut a field of lucerne before moving in so that it would not be ruined. There is a clear distinction even in war between wanton waste and needful waste. The task, in any case, was an enjoyable diversion.

The Italian farmer hardly knew what was happening, but with a host of ex-farmers walking beside the mower and offering gratuitous advice there was no lack of expert supervision—and arguments.

No. 4 Platoon issued at **Bagnarola** on that day and then followed up. No. 5 issued next day (the 25th) at **San Giorgio** while No. 4 leapfrogged ahead with the rest of the company to San Carlo, where it opened a point on the 26th. At last the weather, beautifully fine until now, broke, and rain poured down over the ration stacks, lined across an open field. Ration trucks were soon bogged down, and had to be helped out by Workshops' recovery wagon equipped with chains.

The point operated here for three days, and for once there was a little time to spare—but not for transport drivers. Fifteen vehicles released by 5 and 6 Brigades from troop-carrying duties helped, but there was still plenty to do for every truck lifting the daily pack and carrying ammunition. The pack was lifted from **Faenza** for the last time on the 26th, and then **13 Corps** kept field maintenance centres moving forward regularly.

Headquarters, however, was able to organise a dance each evening at San Carlo. An orchestra was hired, and the Italians, pleased to see the last of the Germans, joined in with gusto.

While the ASC danced, the advance was still sweeping forward. The New Zealanders had been the first to span the Po with a pontoon bridge, and as the bridgehead grew beyond, the main problem became how to squeeze the heavy equipment through the few available channels. On the 26th New Zealand infantry stood on the banks of the **Adige**; on the 27th they were across, accompanied by amphibious tanks and guns in assault boats. Everywhere along the line, now, the German defence was breaking, and by the evening of 28 April the New Zealanders in their sector were nearing **Padua**; swallowing up unprepared rear German units as they went, they entered **Padua** in the early hours of 29 April.

With the Division now across the Po a more forward supply point

became vital. On 26 April No. 4 Platoon made up a pack for No. 5, and a convoy was despatched that evening. After a five-hour wait at the pontoon bridge, the convoy crossed, and the next morning a supply point was ready for business at **Ficarolo**. Thus, as the New Zealand Division faced up to the next major river barrier, the **Adige**, its supply point was already across the barrier it had just passed; to get rations, unit transport would not now have to fight its way back against the north-bound stream across the Po, and the whole ticklish business of getting supplies across the river rested with Supply Company.

Other formations were not so lucky; after issuing 12,500 rations to the Division on the morning of the 27th, No. 5 Platoon was faced with pressing requests for rations from English units whose supply organisation was still south of the Po. The situation was delicate: reserve supplies were still back with the rest of the company, and there was no guarantee when they would come up. The requests were met.

Meanwhile, the Senior Supply Officer, Lieutenant-Colonel **Bracegirdle**, had arranged with the Deputy Director of Supply and Transport, **13 Corps**, for the pack to be ferried across the Po by boat on the night of 27–28 April. Prepared to unload into boats, the convoy went to the barge landing. As they waited in their trucks for something to happen, the drivers looked upon a strange scene. At the south approach to the bobbing, buckling pontoon bridge was an endless queue of vehicles waiting to cross. DUKWs—amphibious trucks—laden with stores, were splashing into the river from the south bank, churning across the current and clambering from sight on the north bank. Barges were shuttling across, carrying supplies on the north trip and wounded and prisoners on the south. Searchlights played on the river upstream to light up any floating mines, and Bofors belched out tracer at anything seen floating downstream; and there were a few bodies among the debris.

Luckily for Supply Company, **Bracegirdle** was able to arrange a priority for the pack convoy, and after some delay it crossed the bridge. Thus No. 5 Platoon replenished its stocks and issued again on the 28th.

Transport platoons were still meeting heavy carrying demands. During the 26th ammunition and **YMCA** stores were carried forward, and late that evening fifty-five further vehicles were requested to carry ammunition to a forward point across the Po.

On the 27th word was received that Driver **Thompson**,¹³ of No. 3 Platoon, who had been with a troop-carrying detail, had been killed by a sniper's bullet.

No. 5 Platoon moved forward again on 28 April to **Trecenta** and opened a point in a tobacco factory, where a paved area gave a firm base for supplies. The rest of the company left San Carlo the same morning and joined the queue to cross the Po. Company Headquarters was across first at 6 p.m., and Workshops came next at 11 p.m., but the platoons had to hang about south of the river and dribbled in between 7 a.m. and 10 a.m. on the 29th. By the time the last trucks had arrived Company Headquarters had gone; word to move had come just after breakfast, and Headquarters had moved out at 9.30 a.m. to an area near **Padua**. No. 5 Platoon remained to make the day's issue, but it was 1 p.m. this day before the point opened; the convoy with the pack had to wait fifteen hours at the bridge and did not reach **Trecenta** until after midday. In spite of frequent delays at the Po, this was the only occasion during the campaign when units were delayed at the supply point.

Padua, for which the company was now bound, had been taken only that morning—1 a.m. is the official time—and throughout the morning there were skirmishes between British and partisan forces and pockets of Germans and fascists. The Division, meantime, had gone on to **Mestre** and thence to the **Piave**, 80 miles from its starting point of less than twenty-four hours before. At **Mestre** a column broke away to take **Venice**. At the **Piave** there was a brief check and some confused fighting, but on 1 May the Division moved on without hindrance towards **Trieste**.

So while the head of the Division was hastening on towards the **Piave**, Supply Company, scattered piecemeal along the **Padua** road, was hurrying along to keep pace. There was an hour's delay at the **Adige**,

where there was a crush of traffic at the pontoon bridge, but once beyond the river Company Headquarters, Workshops and those platoons that had caught up hummed north at a brisk pace. It was a beautifully fine Sunday, and on either side the green fields and crops drowsed in the sunshine. On the roadside the people waved and cheered the passing stream of traffic; flowers and kisses were thrown and vehicles decked with greenery; Italian flags fluttered everywhere.

But the peaceful countryside and the exultant crowds were just a surface gloss, for there was still neither complete peace nor a replete welcome for the conquerors. The fighting line had passed this way only a few hours before, and partisans and Allied troops were still cleaning up odd groups of Germans and fascists. Supply Company men were warned to have their arms ready and loaded.

The Supply Company convoy reached its area a few hundred yards south of **Padua** at 5 p.m. Soon afterwards the pack vehicles arrived, unloaded and turned back to **Trecenta** to pick up the reserve pack. And at 7 p.m. No. 4 Platoon came in and set about arranging a point for the next day's issue. No. 5, which had closed the **Trecenta** point after issuing that day, arrived at 9.30 p.m.

It is worthy of note that in spite of the speed of the advance and the long distances covered, fresh rations, including fresh bread and fresh meat, made up the issue.

On the 30th, while the Division was disputing the **Piave** crossing with small German forces, Supply Company moved on to **Mestre**, leaving No. 4 Platoon to make the day's issue at **Padua**. The tumultuous receptions of the previous day were repeated as the convoy streamed through villages, but again it was not entirely friendly country. Partisans were herding along small bands of Germans, and at **Mestre** small-arms fire and an occasional grenade banged away throughout the day and night.

The pack for issue next day, brought up from south of the Po, did

not reach **Mestre** until the early hours of 1 May, and it was again a night job to get the point ready for a 7.30 a.m. issue. Because there were not enough trucks to lift the reserve from **Padua**, No. 4 Platoon could not move on to **Mestre** until the morning of the 1st.

At **Mestre** there was a brief pause—a welcome pause. April had set a mileage record of 213,277, an average of about 1000 miles a vehicle, and most of this had gone on the speedometer since the 9th. Night and day throughout this period there had been Supply Company transport somewhere on the roads, carrying rations, ammunition or troops, and there had been times when drivers had gone without sleep for forty-eight hours or more. In spite of this—the long hours, the constant haste and the heavy traffic—the only accidents that occurred were one or two vehicles sliding over clay banks. From this severe test drivers had emerged with credit.

The trucks, too, had come through well. In spite of their idiosyncrasies and the lack of time for maintenance, they had performed well; no major work was necessary throughout the advance, and in consequence every truck was always available.

These factors—efficient driving and the high mechanical efficiency of the trucks—together with the unremitting work of supply platoons, gave the New Zealand Division a supply point close behind the fighting units while the supply units of other formations lagged; in fact, the point had sometimes been up with the guns. At **Mestre**, again, the New Zealand point was the only supply point so far forward, and demands for rations from various Allied units were met.

By now everyone was thoroughly tired. It is normal practice during an advance such as this to relieve the forward fighting units with fresh formations, but so long as some part of the Division is in the line the rear units must work on without pause. A day's spell at **Mestre** gave the men a rest and enabled Supply Company and other ASC companies to collect themselves. Some men took the chance of seeing **Venice**, where partisans were still rounding up German troops.

At 3 p.m. on the 2nd Supply Company, less No. 5 Platoon, fitted into the flow of north-bound traffic, its destination **Torviscosa**, 75 miles away, and about 30 miles west of **Trieste**. Traffic again choked the approaches to the pontoon bridge across the **Piave**, and for four hours the company waited. At 6 p.m. a ripple of news came back down the line of traffic: the Germans in **Italy** had surrendered. Bright news in a sombre, prosaic setting. Some men wanted to go back to **Mestre** and **Venice** to celebrate. But there was nothing to be done but sit patiently for a little longer and eventually follow the tail of the truck ahead across the swaying pontoons, and drive on up the road to **Torviscosa**. Headlights now blazed, and soon rain came darting down through the beams. The company reached its destination at midnight, but for once it did not unload immediately. It left that job until 6 a.m.

¹ **Lt A. J. Thomson; Auckland; born Auckland, 1 Nov 1920; storeman.**

² **Lt T. M. Ashby; born Lower Hutt, 5 Jan 1922; civil servant.**

³ **Dvr A. V. J. Carbis; born NZ, 8 May 1912; labourer; died of wounds 23 Apr 1945.**

⁴ **Cpl T. W. Dickson; born Dunedin, 30 Mar 1920; clerk; wounded 23 Apr 1945.**

⁵ **Dvr C. N. Bathurst; Christchurch; born Christchurch, 17 Dec 1921; upholstery apprentice; wounded 23 Apr 1945.**

⁶ **Dvr E. W. Taylor; born Hastings, 6 Apr 1914; lorry driver; wounded 23 Apr 1945.**

⁷ **Dvr L. Roberts; born Wellington, 27 Sep 1922; garage attendant; wounded 23 Apr 1945.**

⁸ Dvr S. R. Chapman; Christchurch; born NZ 5 Aug 1922; brick kiln employee; wounded 23 Apr 1945.

⁹ L-Cpl C. A. D. Tripe; Waiouru; born Nelson, 25 Mar 1920; dairy farmhand; wounded 23 Apr 1945.

¹⁰ Dvr N. S. Toomer; Wainui-o- Mata; born Wellington, 3 Feb 1919; chairmaker; wounded 23 Apr 1945.

¹¹ Dvr W. C. Peterson; born NZ, 11 Sep 1921; farmhand; wounded 23 Apr 1945.

¹² Sgt C. A. Latimer; Christchurch; born Alexandra, 10 Apr 1903; clerk; wounded 23 Apr 1945.

¹³ Dvr A. N. Thompson; born Wellington, 6 Sep 1921; bakehouse labourer; died of wounds 27 Apr 1945.

SUPPLY COMPANY

CHAPTER 18 – END OF THE WAR

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End of the War

AND so, like a Roman candle spluttering out, the war in **Italy** was over. The end in **Germany** came a few days later.

Looking around on the first day of peace on 3 May, Supply Company found itself installed in a vast factory that had drawn down the bombs of the **RAF**. It was—or had been—a fine building, surrounded by trimly laid out grounds, creeper-covered brick arches along the driveway, fountains, swimming baths, statues and tall, stately flagstaffs. Pictures found in the factory showed the official opening, with Mussolini and high-ranking fascists receiving a wild reception from the crowd. On that day fascist flags had hung from these tall poles.

With skilful precision the **RAF** had hollowed out the factory and left the trappings intact. In its small way the building symbolised **Europe** at large: a world built up with fascist and Nazi pomp now reduced to a crumbling shell. That was all there was left for the victors to conquer.

It was a world, moreover, with many problems still unsettled and many loose ends still to tidy up. The New Zealand Division's victorious advance to **Trieste** took it full tilt into political troubles fermented by an aggressive **Yugoslavia's** claims to the city. In addition there was a peace to patch up between the rival Titoists and Chetniks, and the difficulties in the midst of these troubles of arranging for the surrender of various groups of Germans. At **Torviscosa** partisans were busy rounding up odd Germans and fascists; a barber's chair was brought out onto the street, and women who had fraternised with the Germans had their hair shaved off.

The partisans had good cause to be bitter. On 3 May they buried six of their comrades who, while lying wounded, had had their throats cut. It was a colourful funeral, led by partisans armed with rifles, machine guns and grenades, and wearing an assortment of clothing embellished with red scarves. Behind came groups carrying banners and flowers, and

then the flag-draped coffins—Italian flags—carried by well-armed bearers. The tolling of church bells overlaid the scene.

All these things—the bickering, reprisals and general tidying up—ran their course, and though the **Trieste** trouble remained, the Division was at last able to relax in the summer sunshine. Gathered around radios on the 8th, the New Zealanders heard **Mr Churchill** announce the end of the war in **Europe**. A special issue of *Eighth Army News* splashed the headline, ‘Germany Out.’ And there it was, over and done with.

Torviscosa was a pleasant place in which to settle down to a new life of peace. Modern flats connected with the factory had been vacant only since February—when the **RAF** prompted evacuation—and Supply Company men found them comfortable quarters. In some flats the hot water systems were still in operation and the porcelain baths intact. Workshops took possession of a modern cafeteria and part of a theatre. Leave was commenced, and sports soon flourished.

On 30 May there was a reminder of less happy days of the company's history when Sergeant Clarke, taken prisoner of war on **Crete**, arrived unexpectedly. With nine other prisoners, he had walked out of his Austrian prison camp a few days before the end of the war. After a 20-kilometre walk they sheltered for the night in a barn, which they found in the morning to be occupied by a German officer, a sergeant-major and a corporal. The Germans were quite friendly, and together ex-prisoners and ex-captors sat around the radio and listened to **Mr Churchill's** broadcast on the end of the war and, that night, the broadcast speech of King George.

For a day or so Clarke lived with the others in the officers' mess at a nearby aerodrome. Then he decided to visit a count and countess for whom he had worked in 1942. Standing on the road, he halted the first car that looked like an American type; it contained six SS troopers, who handed over without demurring. With his battered Kiwi hat set jauntily on his head, a fernleaf and the number 96—the nearest he could remember to his old unit serial number of 95—painted on the front of

the car, he set off. After a 700-kilometre trip, Clarke found his count. He spent a few pleasant days here, and then moved to **Italy**, where he found Supply Company without difficulty.

The future of the Division was still very indefinite. Under the original replacement scheme, by which 16,000 men had already been sent home, it had been intended to send 6th Reinforcements in June and 7th Reinforcements in September, but the end of the war in **Europe** gave hope that these groups could be sent home 'as soon as shipping can be provided.' This would bring the Division to between 2000 and 4000 below strength, and the scheme to withdraw 7th Reinforcements could not be put into operation until the Division was released from its operational role.

And what of **Japan**? 'It is obviously desirable that New Zealand land forces should be represented,' a memorandum dated 18 May stated. 'It is not possible to give any guidance in the matter as the question is still under consideration between the New Zealand and British Governments. Furthermore, it is dependent on shipping, which is limited and heavily committed for deployment against **Japan**. When a decision is reached it is certain that men with long service overseas will go back to New Zealand and that men with short service overseas would be used in any further operations.'

So while the future was discussed between governments, the Division stayed at **Trieste**. Supply Company's war diary took on a most unwarlike aspect. Typical entries are these: '30 × 3 ton dispatched **Trieste** docks to uplift supplies of amn. Normal pack duties. Sports: Water polo. 21 Sec SAEC 4 v. 1 NZ Sup Coy 3.'

'Normal pack duties. 30 × 3 ton dispatched **Trieste** docks to offload from LTC. Sports: ASC swimming carnival held in baths in company area. Carnival won by Sup Coy by margin of one point from 1 Amn Coy. Water polo: 1 NZ Sup Coy 2 v. 1 NZ Amn Coy 1. 1 NZ Pet Coy 1 v. 1 NZ Sup Coy o.'

And so the time passed. There was not even a whisper yet of repatriation, but there was one farewell when Padre Holland, senior ASC chaplain, left for home. He was popular with everyone, particularly with the men of Supply Company, with whom he had spent much time.

In July the company moved across to the **Lake Trasimene** area by way of **Bologna** and **Fabriano**. At San Feliciano it supplied divisional units as they passed through to their new areas.

In August Japan gave in to the newly found atomic power of the Allies. A month later there was still nothing clear on the Division's return home, but **General Freyberg** told the troops: 'We intend to get all ranks home as soon as possible. There is no question of our taking part in garrison duties in **Europe**. The policy of return will be that those who have been away the longest from New Zealand will return the soonest. Also, in each reinforcement draft married men will have priority over single men.'

The question of finding a small force to garrison **Japan**, he said, was still under consideration.

'Many of our troops will get home by Christmas, but on the other hand some of you will have to remain and will not get back until next year.'

Shipping, of course, was again the crux of the matter. As **General Freyberg** explained, 'with the end of the Japanese war much of our shipping was moving in the wrong direction. Additional priorities for the allocation of passenger shipping have come into being, and the first and second of these priorities are the repatriation of Allied PW from the **Far East** and the move to **Japan** of the large Allied armies of occupation. Then comes the return home of Dominion, British and Allied troops.'

As the ships became available, schedules were issued and the flow of men back to New Zealand began. Even now, however, there were upsets and delays caused by the uncertainty of shipping schedules, and the

divisional policy was to have men due to return home back at Advance Base with all documentation complete. This often meant maddening periods of waiting, but it ensured that the drafts were always on the spot to go aboard when the ships were available.

There were no regrets in these sailings; the soldier is always ready to go home. Yet there is something a little melancholy in the systematic destruction of such a finely tempered weapon as the New Zealand Division had become during six years of war. To form a division of citizen soldiers the Army lays down a framework and builds around it with the green unseasoned material that comes to it from civilian life. And since in the early days of the Second World War there was not a great deal in New Zealand with which to build even the frame, the whole development of the Division into a sturdy and seasoned formation was a vast co-operative enterprise by the professional soldiers and the willing amateurs. Since the muddling beginnings at a time and in places so far distant, the Division had come to maturity amid early disasters and emerged from the final victory a powerful and efficient force; the credit for this end result must in the main go to those who worked through the difficult and sometimes heartbreaking beginnings.

Anyone who cared in this happy moment of home-going to pause and reflect, could trace in his own particular unit a clear course of parallel development—a course that in Supply Company's case led it from haphazard days at [Burnham](#) when there were so few trucks that ASC units had to share for training and so little knowledge that instruction was given by men who kept just ahead of their pupils in the army manuals, to a fully mechanised unit that could carry through a sustained, swiftly mobile advance almost without a hitch, and shoulder odd jobs on the side as well.

Eulogies of soldiers of bygone days come so easily to the tongue and become so embellished with threadbare epithets that they sink to meaningless platitudes, and the image they portray assumes the cold immobility of stone. There follows a danger that the traditions these soldiers established will fall away into the impersonal pages of history

and lose all meaning to those who follow.

And traditions are important. They not only define the character of a nation, but they set standards, and for these standards to endure as the measuring stick for the future, the men who set them must be seen not as hallowed stone but as normal human beings, men who had their weaknesses, who were sometimes cowards and not always willing, and yet who in the critical test collectively set standards of which no nation could be ashamed. The standards they set, standards of heroism, loyalty, devotion or simply technical efficiency, must be studied and understood or their value is lost. Along its relatively obscure course, Supply Company set standards that demand the attention of any future supply company if it is to comprehend what is expected of it. The story of Supply Company in the Second World War shows that a great deal might be expected of such a company, sometimes quite beyond the sphere of normal duty. Who would have anticipated a fighting role as on **Crete**? Then there are a host of lessons on improvisation, adaptability and initiative. But the primary lessons are efficiency and devotion to duty. The first comes through continual application to a task that hasn't much glamour but which offers many compensations; the second is a constant requirement through which an **Army Service Corps** unit justifies itself to the fighting units. Both earn the respect of the troops to whom the service is given—and that is the highest reward attainable.

These were the achievements that were behind Supply Company men who sailed east down the **Mediterranean** in late 1945. Away to the south, across an oily sea, the blue silhouette of the North African coastline was a reminder of the days that will stand out most vividly in the memory of the Division. Here and there a wadi showed up as it caught the sun; a road, perhaps the **Derna** zigzag, traced a winding white course up an escarpment. Later, **Alexandria**, misty and white, showed up on the horizon. Then, on either side of the ships as they filed through the **Suez Canal**, sprawled the mat yellow desert and the straggling palms. Then crowded Port **Tewfik** and the wedge-shaped escarpment. And at last, with the past falling away astern, the ships headed out into the **Red Sea** and

home.

Behind, in **Italy**, the work of dispersing the Division's vast amount of equipment went on. Some was handed over to **Jayforce**, which had been formed as New Zealand's contribution to the occupation forces in **Japan**. Thus, as 1945 ran out, Supply Company dwindled away and cast off vehicles and equipment. The old identities disappeared, and with them the reminiscing of old days and memorable times. By the New Year Supply Company was barely a shadow of its old self.

1946 began like this:

1 January: Very quiet day with no transport details.

2 January: Advice received from HQ 2 NZEF that Coy would disband wef 1 Jan 46. Preparation for disposal of vehicles and equipment, closing of canteen and regimental fund.

But Supply Company still clung to life. There were odd tasks to be done, vehicles to be handed over to **Jayforce**, and the occasional spasm of army 'rotation' to contend with. The last home-going draft of three officers and 114 men was despatched on 10 January, and next day there was left at **Florence** a rear party consisting of Major Roberts, Captain **Crawford**,¹ Captain **Budge**,² Second-Lieutenant Thomson, and just nine other ranks. The hotels formerly occupied by the unit at **Florence** were handed over to the town major, the Italian civilians paid off, and on the 12th three three-tonners and one 15-cwt were handed over to Jayforce NZASC. That left Supply Company with two vehicles, which were still on their way from **Bari** with a parcel mail. One arrived on the 14th and after unloading was handed over to **Jayforce**; the other had broken down. It turned up on the 15th and was also handed over.

One last job remained, the checking and clearance of 'warlike stores'. On 18 January the rear party men were posted to NZ Advanced Base, and the war diary that began more than six years ago signed off with the entry: 'Unit ceases to function as a unit of **2 NZEF**.'

¹ **Capt A. M. Crawford; Lincoln; born NZ, 8 Oct 1919; commercial**

traveller.

² Capt W. G. Budge, m.i.d.; Hamilton; born Christchurch, 10 Jul 1916; engineer.

SUPPLY COMPANY

ROLL OF HONOUR

ROLL OF HONOUR

KILLED IN ACTION

2 Lt D. J. Henshaw	20 May 1941
Cpl T. A. Cornish	28 June 1942
Cpl B. C. Ewing	May 1941
Cpl G. W. MacDonald	28 June 1942
Cpl D. M. P. Shea	27 June 1942
L-Cpl F. P. Duffy	25 May 1941
Dvr J. C. G. Alexander	27 May 1941
Dvr A. E. Armishaw	24 April 1941
Dvr J. Burke	25 May 1941
Dvr J. M. Clarke	28 June 1942
Dvr J. H. M. Cork	28 June 1942
Dvr G. Cox	25 May 1941
Dvr T. L. De Clifford	May 1941
Dvr L. A. Derrett	26 May 1941
Dvr A. R. Dewar	21 May 1941
Dvr D. W. Dillon	27 June 1942
Dvr R. Duncan	27 May 1941
Dvr H. S. Goulden	28 June 1942
Dvr J. F. Harley	28 June 1942
Dvr J. J. H. Kilgour	29 May 1941
Dvr K. J. Lynch	28 June 1942
Dvr J. G. Macdonald	May 1941
Dvr G. S. McLeod	28 June 1942
Dvr F. Mathews	28 June 1942
Dvr C. Scandrett	28 June 1942
Dvr A. E. Waddington	20 April 1941
Dvr J. W. F. Welsh	18 April 1941

DIED OF WOUNDS

Dvr F. E. P. Campbell	29 June 1942
Dvr A. V. J. Carbis	23 April 1945

Dvr M. N. McDonald 20 April 1941
Dvr J. W. Rod 20 April 1941
Dvr J. F. Sheehan 29 June 1942
Dvr J. C. Tabor 29 June 1942
Dvr A. N. Thompson 27 April 1945

DIED ON ACTIVE SERVICE

Capt W. R. Creeser 31 May 1940
L-Cpl J. H. Halliday 19 June 1942
Dvr I. T. Billing 22 August 1944
Dvr J. L. E. Collins 3 September 1943
Dvr W. J. Delaney 20 June 1942
Dvr W. T. Elliott 18 December 1940
Dvr J. H. S. Legg 5 May 1942
Dvr C. G. McFeeters 31 October 1944
Dvr I. F. D. Miller 30 July 1940

KILLED OR DIED AS PRISONER OF WAR

Sgt G. C. Dunn 1 February 1942
Sgt J. Jelley 15 August 1941
Dvr J. W. Timbs 16 April 1945

Summary of Casualties

	Killed		Wounded		Prisoners of War	
	Offrs	ORs	Offrs	ORs	Offrs	ORs
Greece	—	5	—	4	—	11
Crete	1	11	1	29	5	176
Libya 1941	—	—	—	3	1	2
Egypt 1942	—	15	—	19	—	—
Tunisia	—	—	—	1	—	—
Italy	—	2	—	9	—	—
Miscellaneous	—	—	1	1	—	—
TOTAL	1	33	2	66	6	189

The killed include men who were killed in action or who died of wounds. The prisoners of war include 11 other ranks who were wounded before capture, and three other ranks who were killed or died while prisoners of war. Eight other ranks who died on active service are not

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SUPPLY COMPANY

HONOURS AND AWARDS

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MILITARY CROSS

Capt R. E. Rawle 2 Lt A. B. Cottrell

**MEMBER OF THE ORDER OF THE BRITISH
EMPIRE**

Maj L. Bean Capt W. G. Quirk

Maj N. M. Pryde Lt J. B. Grant

MILITARY MEDAL

Dvr R. I. A. Burns Dvr J. G. Macdonald

Dvr M. K. Gibbs

BRITISH EMPIRE MEDAL

S-Sgt O. W. H. Clarke Cpl B. J. Gorinski

Sgt R. A. Witbrock Cpl G. R. J. Harvey

Officers Commanding

Maj E. J. Stock	3 Oct 1939–22 Sep 1940
Capt E. P. Davis	22 Sep 1940–7 Nov 1940
Maj E. J. Stock	7 Nov 1940–12 Nov 1940
Capt I. E. Stock	12 Nov 1940–5 Mar 1941
Maj N. W. Pryde	5 Mar 1941–5 Dec 1942
Maj J. R. Morris	5 Dec 1942–20 Sep 1943
Maj L. Bean	20 Sep 1943–18 Apr 1944
Maj R. E. Rawle	18 Apr 1944–29 Nov 1944
Maj L. Bean	29 Nov 1944–3 Oct 1945
Maj L. W. Roberts	3 Oct 1945–18 Jan 1946

SUPPLY COMPANY

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Capt I. E. Stock	12 Nov 1940–5 Mar 1941
Maj N. W. Pryde	5 Mar 1941–5 Dec 1942
Maj J. R. Morris	5 Dec 1942–20 Sep 1943
Maj L. Bean	20 Sep 1943–18 Apr 1944
Maj R. E. Rawle	18 Apr 1944–29 Nov 1944
Maj L. Bean	29 Nov 1944–3 Oct 1945
Maj L. W. Roberts	3 Oct 1945–18 Jan 1946

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