

ALF CARPENTER



Second To None

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CHAPTER ONE

‘The mateship back then was tremendous and today it is just the same.

I was lucky to get out alive.’

This is the true story of a second generation ANZAC: a man who fought in Palestine in 1940, the Battle of Libya, from Bardia to Benghazi in January 1941, Greece, at Vevi Pass, Brallos Pass and Megara, in 1941, Crete, at Heraklion in April/May 1941, Syria Garrison Duty, Djedeide in 1941/42, and in the defence of Darwin 1943 and Bougainville, New Guinea in 1944/45.

The third of six children, Alfred Clive Carpenter was born in Wagga Wagga, New South Wales, on 22nd April 1917. With a very modest income and lifestyle, the Carpenter family was among thousands of families touched by the Great Depression that started in 1929. Although Alf and his siblings learned at an early age what



Above: Alf, front right

hard work was, they didn't go without food, they had a home, and were lucky enough to avoid many hardships caused by the Great Depression and its resulting poverty.

“Dad worked at Hardy's timber yard. Then, to keep money coming in, he transferred to Tumberumba mills, so he'd come home to 23, Collins Street at weekends. He'd do building jobs at the weekend to bring in more money, and us boys helped him by mixing cement with a shovel, things like that. If we slowed down, we'd get the shovel across our backsides to wake us up a bit!”

Alf's grandparents lived at 21 Collins Street, where his granddad kept horses and drays for use in his work carting gravel for road making. “I remember the time Granddad had finished work for the day, so he turned the horses out into the paddock and went off for a few beers. It must have turned into more than a few beers because he was late home and Grandma got so cranky with him, she let the horses out of the paddock. It took him a very long time to round up his horses, so he lost several days money. That was it for him! He said: ‘Bugger that woman’ packed up and left for Parkes, where he remained until he died. Grandma took in washing to keep going. She had a big old copper and would get up at 2am to wash all the clothes, then have them ironed and ready for us to deliver before we went to school.”

Alf's Uncle Harold, who had served in WW1, also gave the boys' work. He kept a cow at the local showground, where he lived in as caretaker, and the boys' were taught to use an Alpha Separator to separate the cream from the milk. They'd have some of the cream for breakfast, and then deliver the milk in a big 7lb tin they used as a billy can. Alf also picked up a paper round to bring in a little extra.

The Carpenter family worked hard to keep food on the table; but the enterprising young Alf's solo attempt to help himself to fresh pomegranates cost him his place at school. The pomegranates

grew on a tree in the garden of Wagga Wagga High School Principal. Although Alf held his Qualifying Certificate, that would allow him to attend the High School, the Principal blocked him from starting there. Having caught Alf trying to steal a couple of pomegranates from his garden it was non-negotiable! (The school motto was: 'Vincit que se vincit', meaning 'Success through self-discipline'. Young Alf had a lot to learn...)

Alf continued his education at another local school; but when his father told him there was a job going at W G Huthwaite's store, and insisted that Alf go for it, that was the end of school for Alf. Unemployment in Australia was at a record 32% during these years of hardship. It was common for young children to leave school early to help keep the family and home together. He worked as the hardware boy at Huthwaite's and brought in a weekly wage. Any opportunity for paid work was strenuously pursued.



This week's old picture should bring back a few memories to some of our readers who knew Wagga in the late 1920s or early 1930s. The photograph was brought in by Tony Sullivan of Watson ACT and a former Wagga resident. It shows the staff of Huthwaite's department store lined up outside the shop at the top of Baylis' Street. It is interesting that the business appears, from the sign on the verandah at right, to have been called 'The Riverina Stores' although it was known throughout the area as 'Huthwaite's'.

Above: Staff of W.G Huthwaite's, 1936.

Another young local lad who had been at school with Alf was Charlie Jewell. Charlie worked as the 'deli boy' at 'Porky' Richard's delicatessen, where he was taught the dubious art of making blue veined cheese. In the cellar beneath the store huge 30lb cheeses were stored. Charlie was shown how to bruise the cheeses with a pick-axe handle, which, over time, resulted in mould growing through the cheese. Blue veined cheese was worth twice as much as ordinary cheese...All sorts of tricks were learned to help increase income.

During the next few years, in addition to his job at the hardware store, Alf competed in a few boxing bouts, under the supervision of his Uncle Harold. He worked at the fire station at weekends and in 1937, joined Wagga Wagga Beach Lifesaving Club. During Alf's first two years as a Lifesaver, he took part in numerous rescues in the Murrumbidgee River, including diving for bodies of people that had drowned. He was awarded the Royal Lifesaving Bronze and Silver medallions, and the Second Class Instructors Certificate. Alf's next official swimming title came during active service.



Above: Alf, front left at Wagga Wagga Fire Station, mid 1930s

At the age of 18, Alf enlisted in the 56th Battalion Militia Forces. Alf's parents were not happy about him joining up; but Alf was set on it and nothing would change his mind. (In all honesty, the main reason for many joining up at that time was to get accommodation, training, regular meals and a decent coat.)

This young man could have no idea of the extraordinary life that lay ahead of him because of this decision. By January of the following year, Alf had been promoted to Corporal. By the time war broke out in September 1939, Alf had reached the rank of Sergeant.



Above: Alf Carpenter, 18 years old

Due to the limitations imposed by the Defence Act, Australia's Army was permitted to serve on its own territory, but not overseas. To support Britain in the war in Europe, Australian Prime Minister, Robert Menzies made a special announcement at 9:15pm on Sunday, September 3rd: a 20,000-strong expeditionary force was to be formed for overseas service. This force was appointed as the Second AIF.

Military service was a family affair for the Carpenters of Wagga Wagga. Alf's elder brother, Charlie, joined the Tank Recovery Transport Corps, younger brother Vic joined the 56th Battalion Militia, Ron joined the Port Maintenance Company of Royal Aus-



Above: Above: 2/4th Battalion, Ingleburn Camp 1939

tralian Engineers, and youngest brother, Eric, joined the RAN. Their only sister, Rita, was a pianist.

On 10th October 1939, in Narrandra, Alf enlisted in the 2nd Australian Imperial Force and was taken on strength by the new 2/4th Battalion. By the end of November, the 2/4th Battalion had grown



Above: 2/4th Battalion, Ingleburn Camp 1939

in numbers to 22 officers and 843 other ranks. Together with 2/1st, 2/2nd and 2/3rd the 16th Brigade became the first of the newly created 6th Australian Division.

In December 1939, Alf married his sweetheart, Marjorie. The streets of Sydney swelled with around 500,000 people on January 4th 1940, as families, friends and well-wishers converged to give the troops a send off.

On the 10th January, 1940, less than a month after his wedding day, A C Carpenter, Company Sergeant Major Warrant Officer Class 2 of HQ Coy 2/4th Australian Infantry Battalion, embarked on the MV 'Strathnaver' part of the first convoy of the Second AIF. Strathnaver, Otranto, Orford and Orcades all left Sydney harbor together, each one laden with Australian servicemen, stores, supplies and equipment, on their way to active service in the Middle East.



Above: Alf and Marjorie, 1939



Above: Marjorie Carpenter, 1939

The New Zealand troops, that were carried on Empress of Canada, Rangitata, Dunera, Orion and the Polish ship, Sobieski, linked up with the four Australian ships. HMAS Australia and HMAS Canberra, the British battleship HMS Ramilles, soon added their weight and military might to the convoy.

A routine of training, drills, fatigues and more training was, necessarily, quickly established for the men. Guard duties were efficiently scheduled. With a combined weight of around 250,000 tons, knowledge of the presence of these ships would have been hugely inviting to the German Navy. Secrecy equaled security, and all the men knew was that they were going 'somewhere east of Suez'.

During daylight hours, the troops were more than content to be in the unexpected luxury of 'Strathnaver'. There had not been enough time to convert the cruise ships into troopships, so, at this stage they were still elegantly splendid vessels!



Above: MV 'Strathnaver' leaving Sydney on January 10th, 1940

“We even had a cabin steward bringing us a cup of tea in the morning” chuckled Alf.

However, nighttime protocol was strictly adhered to: lights out and portholes closed, without exception, to avoid detection by the enemy.

The convoy berthed in Perth on January 18th. Here the boys from ‘Down Under’ mixed with French and British sailors and troops and the beer flowed freely. Next day there were a few sore heads amongst the march through Fremantle. The atmosphere was completely different to that of their march the previous week in Sydney. Maybe this was because the subdued crowds contemplated that some of ‘their’ boys might not come home.

True to the soldiers’ good humour, a trait that would remain a constant morale booster in the campaigns ahead, an onboard entertainment programme was set up. The boys called this the ‘P&O RMS STRATHNAVER SPORTS & SOCIAL CLUB in conjunction with 2nd AIF Ultra Modern Ensemble, RAZZLE DAZZLE’.

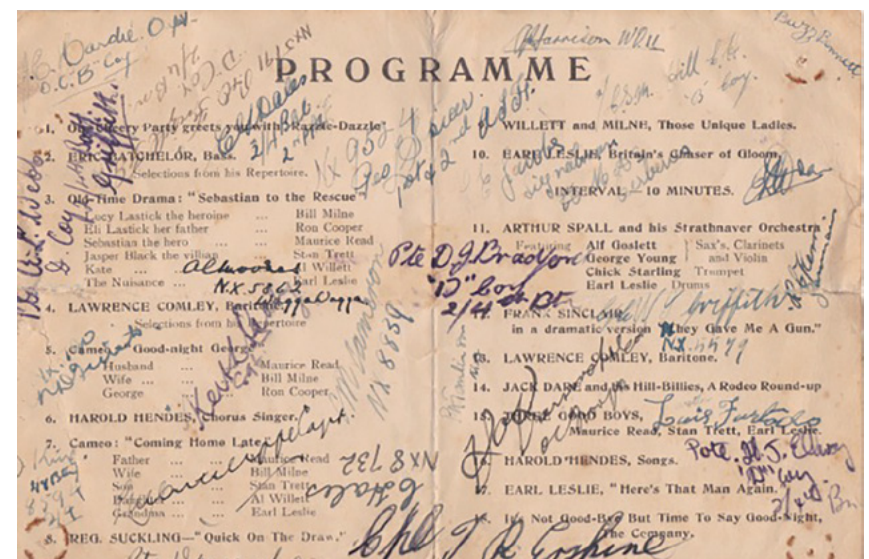
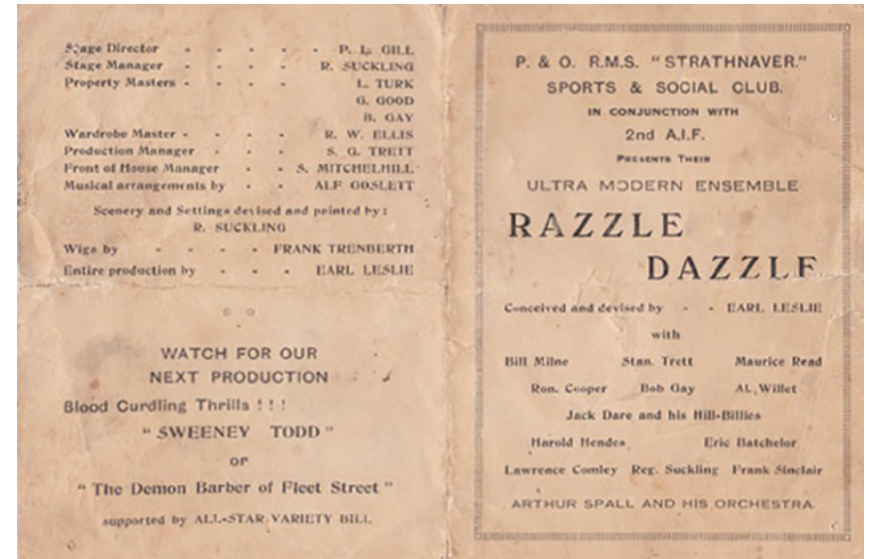
Other creative types came up with a weekly called the Blue Light, a publication that contained articles relevant to their destination, some occasional flippancy for fun, and poetry written by the boys on board.

Before leaving to attend other duties, *Canberra* and *Australia* sailed through the convoy, signaling: ‘Goodbye, good voyage’, and the troops watched mainland Australia disappear into the distance.



Above: A C Carpenter, Company Sergeant Major Warrant Officer Class 2 of HQ Coy 2/4th Australian Infantry Battalion

Alf said: “I don’t think there was much thought of ‘Will we come home? The general feeling amongst the troops was excitement at what we thought was the start of a great adventure, and how lucky we were to be on board”.



Above: P&O Rms Strathnaver Sports & Social Club Programme.

CHAPTER TWO

As troops prepared for disembarkation in Kantara, Egypt, the ship's Officer in Command, Colonel Parsons, spoke to the men about the area where they would soon begin a new chapter of the 2/4th Battalion's annals. He briefed them about the climate, the people, their cultural differences and the importance of security.



Above: Camp bugler

In summary he said:

“Let me take this opportunity of thanking all ranks for the great camaraderie which exists upon this troopship, and for the discipline shown throughout the voyage. I am sure that associations formed on this ship will be everlasting and will greatly assist my unit in carrying out the difficult tasks which they may have to face in the future”.

Strathnaver moored on the night of 13th February 1940.

Alf entrained to Julis Camp, fifteen miles north of Gaza. Here the kilted 2nd Battalion of the Black Watch Regiment had already erected tents and prepared the basic requirements for the newly arrived troops. No mean task given the rough uneven ground in the tough desert landscape. Within weeks of the Australians' arrival, roads and paths were painstakingly dug out and the camp was shaken into an efficient and tidy base, complete with level pa-

rade ground and rifle ranges.

During the months in Palestine, the men were put through regular route marches, platoon and company exercises, to help them 'toughen up' in readiness for the tasks ahead. Their next move was to the camp at Qastina, several miles north of Julis.

With so many fit young Aussies near a decent beach, and some very tempting waves, it was only a matter of time before the 'Gaza Beach Lifesaving Patrol' was formed! Alf's home typed: 'Lifesaving Activities of Alfred Clive Carpenter', dated October 1995, states that he was a founder of this unplanned but welcome distraction around May 1940. With Surf Lifesavers' from many different clubs amongst the troops, these occasions provided a more relaxed, enjoyable form of physical training, although the friendly inter-club rivalry from home remained.

In July of 1940, the 2/4th Infantry Battalion was amalgamated with the 2/1st Field Regiment and referred to as 'X' and 'Y' Anti-Aircraft Regiments. Until this time, Infantry and Artillery had not, traditionally, worked together. ('Footsloggers' and 'Drop-



Above: Gaza Surf Lifesavers, 1940



Above: Alf, right, Egypt, 1940

shorts' was how they referred to each other). So, military history was being made during this new pairing of two completely separate units. It was highly successful and the men worked efficiently as a team.

On July 4th Alf was transferred to 'Y' Regiment as part of the force responsible for taking control until the new and fully trained A.A Regiment arrived from Australia. Until their arrival, selected troops that were already on the ground had a brief but intense training period.

Italy had now entered the war, which meant that the threat of air raids by the Italian Air Force was a reality. Both 'X' and 'Y' Regiments were swiftly sent to Haifa to train with the British on 3.7-inch Anti Aircraft Guns. Alf's 'Field Message Book 153' shows pages of figures, numbers and notes about trajectory, height, angles and bearings made during his own training with imaginary

predictors in this vigorous learning period.

These men were the first Australian troops to see action in the Middle East. Bardia was the site of the first battle fought by Australian troops in the Second World War.

On July 11th Alf was detached for duty with the 28th AA Battery Royal Artillery. Seven days later, the Artillery was on active duty during the Italian air raids on Haifa when ten Italian Savoia 79 Bombers dropped multiple bombs. Shell Oil Company storage tanks were hit and fires sprang up at the refinery on the northern end of the bay. No serious damage was done, but one hit was too close to the camp for comfort, so troops were moved nearer to the top of Mount Carmel. A second Italian air-raid followed within days. This attack led to the deaths of forty eight local people, and an additional seventy five were listed as missing.

The sudden, but relatively short, burst of activity by the Italians over Haifa stopped. Less than a month after fast and furious training in Anti-Aircraft weaponry, Alf was back with 2/4th Battalion. Friendships had grown with the 2/1st Field Regiment during their combined duties: bonds that would prove their worth in times ahead.

12th November 1940 brought the next move by train. This time to Burg-el-Arab, via Ismailia, Zag-a-zig and Alexandria: where the boys could see searchlights piercing the night sky, seeking out Italian planes.

Their arrival at Burg-el-Arab found them exhausted from trekking the last three-miles, laden as they were with all the paraphernalia of crucial equipment. Once dug in and secure though, the troops settled into the familiar routine of preparation for hostilities.

Christmas 1940 was a strange one for many, this being their first away from home, and their first at war. Letters and parcels from loved ones back in Australia made all the difference. These were

the times when the Postal Officer was the most popular man in camp! Periodic issues of Australian Comfort Fund parcels, often containing luxuries like cake, tinned fruits and 'smoko's' were always welcomed and appreciated by the men too.

On December 30th the New Zealand transport convoy arrived: having been on alert for action for some weeks, it was now time to move on.

By nightfall of 31st December, Alf had reached Mersa Matruh, a town that had been bombed and battered. The next day, he travelled 130 miles onwards to Salum, then through Sidi Barrani and on to Bardia. The troops could hear the thunder of guns at night from twenty miles away.

Ahead of Alf, and all our troops, was the Western Desert Campaign. Spirits were high, rations were low; but along with the British and Indian forces, the Australian and New Zealand men were prepared for their first major battle of WWII, 'Operation Compass'.

2nd January 1941, Alf's diary notes: "Stopped for night out of Sidi Barrani. Shell fire all night. Moved up to reserve line tonight".

On 3rd January 1941, troops of the 16th Brigade of the 6th Australian Division attacked and broke through the western face of the de-



Above: Christmas card from Alf to Marjorie, Bethlehem, 1940

fensive perimeter. At the same time, the 2/6th Battalion mounted a diversion in the south. 17th Australian Brigade troops attended to the southern defences when they arrived later that morning, while the men of the 16th continued onward to Bardia, which was captured on the 4th of January as the evening was drawing in. It was not until the afternoon of the 5th of January that Italian resistance to the south had ceased, with the 6th division diversionary force having lost 130 men, with 326 wounded in the fighting. The 16th division troops, when all was said and done, managed to capture almost 40,000 Italian prisoners, as well as a significant quantity of rations, ammunition, equipment, and alcohol. These were not wasted.

During this period, Alf led a burial party to the site where an Italian observer plane was shot down. "His body parts were scattered about, and the boys found the Italian's penis, separate from the rest of his trunk. Well, you can imagine there was a fair bit of talk going on at this find. Then Padre Paddy Reed came along to conduct the burial service. He was not amused. The deceased's penis was promptly buried with the rest of his body parts".

3rd January: "Got into 'funk holes' okay. Hit the hay at 24:00hrs. Artillery opened on Bardia at 04:30hrs and still on the belt at 10:00hrs. Monty Siems shrapnel wound. Italian prisoners' in their 1000's. Got a skin full of rum. Whacko!"

4th January 1941, Alf's diary: "Conveying (Italian) prisoners all night, until they dropped from hunger. Air raid 11:30hrs. All OK. Moved forward into position out of Bardia".

5th January: "Taking Bardia today. Moved up. Trucks and dead Italians along track. Now just out of South Bardia. Reached objective OK 1500hrs. No casualties. Got a watch and photographs. After a 'Colt' got half a dozen 38's. Kept a real boomer for myself".

6th January: "Let us have a sleep in today. Expect to move to To-

bruk this afternoon. Wrote letter. Hope to get it to Marge. All OK on way to Tobruk”.

7th January: “Spent last night on road. Am now about 30km out of Tobruk. Three-ton truck crashed (‘D’ Company) All OK. Arty guns tipped over along road. 2/4th Battalion trucks in 100’s. Troops debussed. Got into position OK. Dug in, moved forward again. Got lost looking for rations for two hours”.

8th and 9th January: “Laid on backs all day. Orders to move on to First Defence Line of Tobruk at 2000hrs. Got away OK. One Platoon of carriers and Company HQ drew crabs (attracted enemy fire) at 2300hrs Machine Gun and Artillery. Found Sig Wire at wadi and followed it up to advise Battalion HQ of MG along line. Moved back 2000 yards and established Battalion HQrs. Went back for Platoon at 0400hrs. Cold as hell. Slept exhausted for half hours at a time until daylight. Easy day. Little Artillery”.

10th January: “Arty still on us. Air raid at night otherwise all OK. Company HQ’s in a beaut cave. Bomb proof”.

11th January: “Stand to as usual 0600hrs. Little Artillery chap, Sid Harris, had a shrapnel wound to his buttock, but quite OK. Now for rations from ‘B’ echelon. 1600hrs 2/1st Field Regiment liason with us. Little bombing”.

12th January: “Quiet night. Bill Nesbitt and Bo Rowbotham shrapnel wounds. Wounded to hospital about 1100hrs. All else OK”.

13th and 14th January: SFA (Security Force Assistance)

15th January: “Moving out of line for a spell tonight before the big push”.

16th January: “All troops in to bivouac area 0400hr by the sea. Had a much needed wash and swim”.

17th January: “Reveille 0800hrs. Off today for the works on To-

bruk. Here’s hoping. Arrived with issue at 0430hrs. Just died until:-”

18th January: “1000hrs. What a day. Dust and wind still out of Tobruk. Wind dropped at night”.

19th January: “Moving into new position tonight between escarpments. All troops in at 0500hr. Slept until 1000hrs. Wrote some letters (G E)

20th January: “The works are on tomorrow. Here’s hoping for a good day. Just on 1730 now and it is getting cold”.

Brigade plans for the attack of Tobruk were in place. Regular night patrols, led by Platoon Commanders, had successfully gathered steady and accurate information on enemy positions and strongholds. In the first movement of this action, the 2/4th Battalion was to lead, with 2/8th to their left and 2/11th to their right, after 2/3rd had captured significant Italian posts.

For some of the Infantry units the following day was the day of a record march. Excerpt from ‘Dearest Geraldine’ Letters From A Soldier, by Norman M. Johnstone of the 2/4th Australian Infantry Battalion: “...It is supposed to have gone down in the official history as ‘...a march of 23 miles under incessant shell fire...’ which is a bit of an exaggeration but sounds pretty good...”

Either way, this powerful movement of troops suitably confused the Italian forces and probably prevented them from re-grouping to counter attack.

The Western perimeter of Tobruk was successfully penetrated by the British Armoured Division, while the 16th Australian Infantry Brigade advanced to the north west. A troop of tanks rumbled through before the 2/4th Battalion, headed for north of Tobruk. Further Battalions began a ‘mop up’ operation in the wadi areas that lay north and east of the Bardia road. During this action, the

Italian Area Commander was captured: he was made to telephone neighbouring posts and instruct their occupants to surrender. By noon of 22nd January, organized resistance was virtually non-existent. Troops remaining tasks were to collect prisoners and organize forces for their next move.

CHAPTER THREE

The 2/4th Battalion was first of the Western Desert Force into Benghazi. This was the final push through Cyrenaica, an Italian colony in the eastern coastal region of Libya.

There were a few skirmishes en route; but many of the stronger points were unoccupied, and the area was undefended by the Italian command that were, by now, on the last phase of their retreat.

Benghazi had been surrendered.

An official, and final, surrender had to be recorded. A formal message from Brigadier Robertson in Benina was delivered to the local dignitaries of Benghazi, amidst cheering and waving from the happy townsfolk!

Diary of Alf Carpenter, 7th and 8th February 1941: "Handing over ceremony in Benghazi, White Over Green Parade under Australian flag, without stars. Just been made by the look of things. CO of 2/4th Battalion, Colonel Dougherty, read the Proclamation in English, before it was read in Italian and Arabic. Libyan Campaign finished. 16,000 prisoners back to Benina for the night".

Excerpt from 'White Over Green The 2/4th Battalion and reference to the 4th Battalion': "It was a sombre setting for such an historic occasion, but the crowd was none-the-less responsive. They were accustomed to bright colours, gorgeous trappings and all the finery of the Italian forces. Instead, they beheld a company of tall, tired-faced sunburnt men-the very antithesis of martial glory-but strong and steady: and fully alert to the solemnity of the occasion..."

Brigadier Robertson informed the titled throng that General Mackay would soon arrive to take over the city, whilst Colonel

Dougherty was appointed commandant of the town, and would work alongside the local Carabinieri in matters of local peace and order.

Alf's diary 9th February: "Got 15 cases of Italian beer from a picture theatre storage depot, together with tinned cherries and beans. Left Sam Irvine guarding the beer. Kay McIntosh, Johnny Hawkins, Sam Irvine and myself in our room. Whacko!"

Elsewhere in Benghazi, there were some comments about beer going missing from the local brewery, and an in-depth investigation was called. Seems it was a long night...

Food and ammunition dumps were sought out and appropriately guarded. Lice and fleas were rife in the Italian Barracks, much to the disgust (and discomfort) of the Aussie troops. Frequent air-raids were one thing; but bedbugs, lice and fleas caused even more interrupted sleep.

Action during the past two months had resulted in 475 killed, less than 1,300 wounded and missing. 130,000 Italian prisoners had been taken, 400 tanks, nearly 1,300 guns as well as small arms, ammunition, vehicles, stores and equipment that was requisitioned. Ten enemy Infantry divisions had been destroyed.

11th February: "Battalion Parade 0830hrs. General Blamey arriving by plane today. Guard of Honour.

12th February: "Bombs and mines dropped by planes last night. (Australian Prime Minister) Mr Menzies addressed troops".

General Blamey accompanied Mr Menzies when he met with some of the units. The appearance of the troops was duly noted: battle-scarred, stained and ragged uniforms and, overall, a dishevelled looking bunch. Countless pairs of Army Issue boots had long been worn out, so, many of the Australian's wore Italian leather boots and carried necessarily varied versions of equipment.

Within days, according to Alf's diary: "Fitted with new uniforms".

17th February: "Whacko! 800 miles in a 30cwt. Expect to be on the move at 0800hrs".

With an overnight stop at Tobruk, breakfast at Bardia and leave in Alexandria, Alf enjoyed some welcome 'luxury' and was able to cable his wife and mother. He even had a trip to Alexandria Zoo on the agenda. On 21st February, Alf caught up with old mates from 2/1st Machine Gunners, old Jerry Austin was also there. (Jerry had been a member of the 56th Militia and 2/4th Battalion) 23rd February: Alf stayed the night at Amirea with the boys, then moved on to Derna awaiting Battalion Convoy.

Once the convoy was through, Alf's unit waited for orders to go up Derna Pass. Once on the move, they reached their Bivouac position, about 58 kms out of Tobruk, where they received orders to move, which were then cancelled.

During this week of comfort parcel distribution, church services, parades and rest, another old friend of Alf's, from 6th Division, 'Happy' Claude Day from Wagga Wagga-dropped in to say 'G'day' while he was en route to Benghazi.

6th March: "Orderly room for 0900hrs. 'Smithy' (think it was Blah) has taken a convoy for 20th Brigade. Word through that Convoy was machine gunned and bombed".

7th March: "Took over 2/2nd Btn position in wadi. Still in the land of plenty. 16th Brigade Convoy left for Mersa Matruh".

8th March: "Am writing a few letters today. One to Marge, Mother and Ron. Swam in the Med-got a little bit sunburned on my bum. Fred Catley promoted to Sergeant and Bill Wall Corporal. Boska Day".

14th March: "On way down to Matruh. Stopped for night at Sidi Baranni". The following day at Matruh, to the Company Sergeants'

Quarters with Don Healey, Kay McIntosh, Johnny Hawkins, Fred Catley, Ron Booty, Sam Irvine. What a combo”.

On 27th March the Italian 3rd Naval Division ships, cruisers Trieste, Trento and Bolzano were spotted, by a British Sunderland flying boat on reconnaissance, as they headed towards Crete. An Italian battleship out of Naples, the Vittorio Veneto, carried the flag of Admiral Iachino. In addition to these ships were the Zara, Pola, Fiume, Duca degli Abruzzi and Garibaldi from Brindisi. Their purpose: to attack British shipping supplies for Greece, from Alexandria. The reconnaissance flying boat's observations alerted the British fleet in Alexandria and the biggest naval battle of WWII, so far, took place off Cape Matapan on 28th March. The Italian Navy suffered its most serious defeat.

31st March: “Reveille 0200hrs. Entrain 0500hrs. Embark 0800hrs. Just finished a great three-course dinner aboard ss Penland (Dutch ship)”.



Above: Searchlights over Alexandrai Harbour, 1941

In peacetime, this ship would have carried around 1,500 passengers. On this occasion she transported 1,000 more than that: all of them troops on their way to Piraeus, the port of Athens.

1st April 1941: “Full Division aboard various ships. Parade 0930hrs Boat Stations Drill. Now out in the main stream. Waiting for Convoy. 1614hrs Am now pulling out of Alexandria Harbour”.

Troops arrived to the warmest of greetings on 3rd April. The warm-hearted Greeks welcomed them with flowers and cheers. As the men travelled north, morale was high and the beautiful lush land that surrounded them also boosted their spirits; particularly after the previous months of dust and desert and scant vegetation. The women of Greece were beautiful too: a sight for sore eyes. Some very welcome leave was granted and the men soaked up the warmth, hospitality, and, of course, the local beer and red wine.

Alf was promoted to Regimental Sergeant Major. When he met up with Max Darbyshire, an old mate from Wagga Wagga and shared his good news, a celebration of some sort was definitely on the cards.

“The monks were self-supporting, had all their own cattle, chickens, vegetables and also grapes: and, they made their own wine! Mavro Daphne it's called, like a fortified wine, a port. Max Darbyshire was Commandant there”.

Alf joined his old surf live saving friend, who had quarters up in the monastery, and enjoyed a very pleasant evening! “I wasn't real well the next day...”

CHAPTER FOUR

The cradle of civilization

The mountains look on Marathon-

And Marathon looks on the sea;

And musing there an hour alone

I dream'd that Greece might still be free...

Written by Lord Byron, a young English poet who died in Greece in 1824.

On 5th April, 1941, Australian, New Zealand, Greek and British troops were given a great send off by the kindly Greeks as the next leg of their journey began. The men were on a train to Larissa, west of Mount Olympus. Although conditions were cramped on the cattle train, as it rumbled through the sunset into the night, it was possible to see fields of crops in abundance, snow-capped sun-kissed mountains, and the vibrant hues of wild flowers. Among those breathtaking flowers were the famous Flanders poppies.

Greece was not, as yet, at war with Germany.

Benito Mussolini's armies had invaded Greece in October 1940; but the Greeks beat back his forces. This unexpected action aroused Adolf Hitler's concern that the Greeks could well seek the support of British forces, and therefore include the additional support of Australian and New Zealand troops. A military expedition called 'Lustre Force' became a reality that Hitler had not, until then, considered. A force that consisted of 17,000 Australians, 16,700 New Zealanders, and 60,000 British and Dominion servicemen and women.

Yugoslavia and Greece were invaded by German forces on 6th April. There was very little concentrated military defence of Yugoslavia, strung out as its army was along three borders with Austria, Bulgaria and Hungary. The only Allied forces available in the area were: New Zealand, holding the Katerina area; 16th Australian Infantry Brigade, holding the Veria Pass; the XII Greek Division in the Edessa area and the XX Greek Division further north, and a British Armoured Brigade forward in the broad valley of the Axios River. There was minimal Allied air power present in Greece.

German panzer divisions swiftly spearheaded through the thinly spread Yugoslav defences. One of these formidable panzer divisions was the mechanized SS Leibstandarte Brigade, led by Nazi fanatic, Josef 'Sepp' Dietrich. In command of the Leibstandarte's 1st Battalion was Fritz Witt, later described as one of the young Germans whose "most significant feature is their lack of humanity, their disrespect for anything human".

Under the overall command of Major General Ivan Mackay, the immediate role of the 2/4th Battalion, Greek, British, New Zealand artillery, tanks, engineers and infantry combined (the Mackay Force) was to delay the advance of the Germans for as long as possible.

Colonel Dougherty was Commanding Officer, and now word was out that Thessaloniki had fallen to the Germans, as had Benghazi. The future looked grim.

Alf's diary entry 9th April: "0700hrs up near the Yugoslav Border. Tanks and troops retreating. Taking up position in the Alps (Vevi Pass). Rarified air a bit of a problem, lack of oxygen takes a lot of getting used to".

The average height of this area was three thousand feet above sea level. Altitude exhaustion was exacerbated by the physical exertion involved when negotiating the rocky ridges and 'digging in'

to frozen ground. Snow and freezing winds further challenged the men, who 'doubled up' at night: two men, two blankets, were warmer than one man, one blanket.

The men were cold, exhausted and hungry; but their task was more than important.

Heavy German forces broke through the centre of the Allied troops' defence, and the 2/4th moved across in an attempt to close the gap. Enemy tanks and machine gunfire rained down; but RAF fighters and bombers supported ground troops by strafing the enemy areas. A Hurricane crash-landed in no man's land. Both German and Aussie ground troops rushed to the pilot. 'B' Company, led by Lieutenant Ken Kesteven reached Flight Lieutenant Wood before the Germans to rescue him. He was later shot down and killed over Athens.

Alf's diary, 10th April: "Air activity today. German spotter planes, Moving back to rear Btn HQs. Jerry (Germans) still advancing".

During the night of 10th April, German tanks destroyed some of the Allied force's minefields. Patrols of Germans, dressed as our friends the Greeks, gained access through our lines. There was no way of knowing they were German until their guns told the real story. With this subterfuge, the Germans captured a few men.

11th April: "Gas capes issued. Five casualties. Shellfire 'B' Company. Lt Davern, Sgt Menzies among wounded".

12th and 13th April: "Oh boy, what a night. Sleet and snow. Up at 0645hrs. Was it hard to get lads up for stand to". (An important procedure for Infantry in exposed positions, 'stand to' is a special state of readiness that takes place an hour before and after first and last light).

"Snow stopped but still freezing and windy. Pulling out of position. Overrun by Jerry, tanks and motorized Infantry. Looks as if

the goods are reversed. Got through with gear ok. 25% of Btn out, hope rest make it today. Going to walk over and find Btn if possible. 8 miles over snow and hills with Transport Officer. 1545hrs Left TO".

At this stage the telephone line between Battalion HQ and Company HQ was out of action, leaving runners (foot soldiers) as the only method of communication available between platoons.

Alf's Company was carrying out critical rearguard actions: "The Germans had cut us off. They came in behind us so the CO and I decided there was only one way to get out of it and that was a fighting withdrawal. So, we got out and formed up on the Aliakmon River. We got set up there, but one of our companies was cut off on the Vevi Pass".

"A chap by the name of Major Barham was in charge. Given that he'd already lost quite a few blokes, and in order to save the others, he surrendered. Being cut off as they were, his company were sure to be knocked off next. Major Barham and his men were used as a human shield by the Germans to protect them from being shot". (Alf saw this through binoculars). Major Barham was shot and killed. It was reported that Company Sergeant-Major Ken Richardson shot and killed the German that shot Major Barham.

The only bridge across the Aliakmon River was blown up. "What are we going to do from here? The Intelligence Officer and myself went up and down the river from our place to see if there was anywhere to ford the river. We had no way of getting out with the bridge blown up".

"That river's about 50 meters across, maybe more, and quite deep and we couldn't find anywhere shallow enough to form a human chain to get the rest of the troops out. So, I did a little test before committing myself to swimming the river. I stripped off and wrapped my uniform in a ground sheet which I tied up and floated

across the river. I then swam the river, and got across to my uniform and our Brigade HQ on the other, southern, side”.

“We managed to get our engineers to find materials to put a single footbridge across the river; but we’d have to hold the Germans off for another 8-10 days while this was being built.

We had patrols going day and night. We still had anti-tank rifles, which were alright if you could hit the slit in the tank where the driver’s head was; but we told our gunners not to waste ammunition, and only shoot if they could get a clear shot. We knocked a few tanks off, so they left us alone after that.

After eight days we managed to get what was left of the battalion out across the river, via the unfinished footbridge our blokes had made”.

By this stage, the Greek forces were under considerable pressure: each man fought valiantly to defend his country; but the borders were falling to the enemy. For months now, the Greeks had been successfully thrashing the Italians by their courage alone, often in hand-to-hand combat. They could no longer supply their isolated groups of forces in the mountains. The proud Greeks that fought had little in the way of clothing, food or equipment: their few rifles were pre-WWI, donkeys were their mode of transport, and they were vastly outnumbered by the German ground troops, tanks, artillery and air power.

Alf’s diary, 18th April 1941: “Air raids in flights up to 50 planes. Belting hell out of Battalion. My Batman, Charlie Pearson, jumped into a ditch at the side of the road during a raid, took a swig from his water bottle full of grog, then propped himself up into a position where he could see what’s going on. Informed me he will be able to let his grandkids know all about raids now. Moving to Bralos tonight”.

22nd April: “Jerry trying to blast us off Pass with artillery. Charlie Jewell killed, Kent and Mason wounded”.

“We’d managed to keep out of sight, but the slaughter started. Our 25lb artillery section kept the German tanks from getting through, but only for a while. The Germans retaliated by annihilating our gun and its crew. A dear mate of mine from Wagga Wagga, Corporal Charlie Jewell was killed. He was 20 years old. I said: ‘Let them have it’. It was us or them”.

23rd April: “Air raids all day. Back to Rail Head to get ammo for 2/1st MG (machine gun) lads. Moving out tonight. Looks like evacuation of Greece”.

24th April: “Got Battalion on the move. Remained behind night with CO at Battalion HQ. Left t 0430hrs as German Patrol was coming up gully about 30 yards away. Back 14 miles South. Air raids again. If only we had an Air Force, what a show we might have. On the move again tonight, 80 miles”.

25th and 26th April: “Arrived at Megarah at 0430hrs. Laid doggo all day, embarking tonight I hope. Planes over, but not spotted. Slept most of the time. Ready to go aboard at 2030hrs, put on trucks at 2400hrs. Off again. Managed to get aboard the Hasty at 0200hrs. What a great lot of chaps the crew are. Landed at Suda Bay in Crete. Marched 7 miles to camp”.

June 2016 and Alf picks up the story: “Our next action was at Brallos Pass. Transport was difficult, because there were so many convoys of troop-carrying trucks. Stuka dive-bombers would drop bombs on the convoys, then strafe along the sides of the roads they’d targeted. I often had to dive into culverts at the side of the roads. I arrived a couple of days late, after the others.

When I got there the CO grabbed me and said: “Thank goodness you’re here. We had you posted as missing in action”!

Our orders were to get back to Megara, and board HMS Hasty, a British Destroyer, back to Crete”.

One of Alf's vivid memories of this area was of an elderly Greek peasant woman sitting at the side of the road. Her clothes were ragged, and she was very thin; but she had in her hand a small piece of bread, which she offered up to the soldiers. "She'd lost everything and was starving. Yet, she would have given that last piece of bread to an Australian soldier".

The Greek people had welcomed the Australians with warmth when they were full of hope: despite the heavy losses and dark times, that bond between Greece and Australia was not shaken.

'In a fighting withdrawal, against overwhelming odds in numbers, weapons and air support, the 2/4 became second generation ANZACS on 12th April 1941. General Blamey's order of the day proclaimed that the Australian and New Zealanders under his command would henceforth be known as ANZAC Corps, the first (and only) time since 1915 that the acronym has been applied to a military formation. Not that the 2/4th had time or opportunity to digest the historical import of the event. They were far too busy fighting for survival'.

"Hence, we shall not say that Greeks fight like heroes, but that heroes fight like Greeks." Winston Churchill

CHAPTER FIVE

The long and hazardous naval evacuation to Crete followed. Crete was a territory the German army and its allies wanted: firstly, because the Island could be used as an advanced flank-guard for their position in the Middle East and Africa; secondly, because with marine and air force bases there, the British and their allies could better protect Mediterranean sea lanes. For the Germans, Crete represented a highly favoured position for the air force in attacks against Egypt and the Suez Canal.

For the German forces plans, airfields near Maleme, Rethymon and Heraklion were of the greatest importance. Germany had enough aircraft on the Greek airfields to land 6,000 men on Crete, and would have no hesitation in doing just that.

Following the highly dangerous voyage from Greece, when the sailors of all Allied Navies and merchant ships of the Mediterranean Fleet were heroic in their actions, Alf's unit was sent to a part of the Island of Crete to take up defensive positions.

27th April: "Did a 10 mile march to a new area, other side of harbour. Saw Ken Best from Wagga Wagga. 1535hrs and now overlooking harbour. Had a good cool dip".

28th April: "Slept well. Move 0830hrs about 6 miles to other side of island to take up position. Arrived ok 1100hrs. Wash and clean up, parked under olive trees. Rations very scarce".

29th April: "Reveille 0700hrs. Air raid over harbour. Dive bombers. On two hours notice to move. Where? March to destroyers, boarded the Havoc, then to Heraklion, the main town of Crete. Arrived at 0400hrs. Marched to outskirts".

1st May: "Reveille 0700hrs. Moved to battle positions. It's great to be quiet again. Three sergeants from 2/3rd attached. Charlie Pearson purchased plonk, so Cressy and me had a night of it".

2nd May: "Stand to 0530hrs. Pay 50 Drachma. One ASC, one 2/2 Btn, one 2/3rd Bn attached to us, together with 50 New Zealand chaps".

3rd May: "Wrote letters home. ASC attached well affected by plonk, said we're all a lot of Huns. Soon quietened him down with a tap on the chin".

4th May: "5% (of Battalion) to go on leave today to Heraklion. Must have a look at the place. Hicks and Coutts were in luck today. Had a swim and a sunbake".

5th May: "Clear weather. Glorious sunshine. Going to put in a bomb shelter today. Put morning in digging, afternoon making Battle HQ. Browning, Pearson and Ogilvy day's leave".

6th May: "Still digging out funk hole in side of cliff on type of shale ground. Usual Iti spotter plane over. Getting a good colour up. Falla, Harbour and Woodhouse on leave".

8th May: "CO's orderly room 20GBP for Spitfire fund. McIntyre, Matthews, Thomas leave. Sky overcast, looks like rain. Air Force Concert tonight".

9th May: "Quiet day today. Digging out tunnel. Mylon, Collis, Gray leave. Pay-day".

10th May: "Moving out today at 1900hrs to swap over position with Black Watch. All in ok at 2200hrs".

11th May: "Church parade at 0900hrs. Clothing issued. Jefferies and Connors leave. Rest of Btn in from Suda Bay".

12th May: "No rest for us. Continuous raid every hour over Candia, moving again today. Arrived at position about 1 mile away up with CO".

13th May: "CO's orderly room at 1400hrs. Four for 28 days de-

tention for AWOL. Into town to interview provost witnesses for tomorrow at 1000hrs".

14th May: "Early morning raid. Lone plane. CO away for morning. Orderly room cancelled until 1500hrs. Dog fight: 1 Gladys against 5 Dorniers. Great show. Dorniers over again at dusk, dropped load of bombs. 1 down in flames from ground fire".

15th May: "On and off raids all night. Beautiful air raid. Heavy raid at dawn. 3 Dorniers shot down while writing to Marjorie had to duck for cover under an olive tree. Planes over during day. Evening heavy raid as usual".

16th May: "Stand to at 0500hrs with a beaut bombing raid on Greco Barracks. 2 Hurricanes arrived this morning. Whacko for Jerry now! Easy day".

17th May: "10 Bristol Beauforts arrived. Looks like quite a show. Jerry must get the word through about these crates, as there was no more of his planes over".

18th May: "Our planes left during early morning. Jerry over again with MG and bombing. Erected a trip wire across our wadi, let 'em come up it again straffing us".

19th May: "A couple of machine gunning raids. Am getting used to them, if it were at all possible. None of our Air Force left".

By this stage, we had not washed for a week or two. Max, our CO, said to me: "We'll go down for a swim in the morning."

I got security all sorted ready for our much-needed wash, when the phone rang: Colonel Campbell said he's in trouble at Rethenon. German paratroopers have taken the Aerodrome and we might be the next lot".

From Alf's Diary 20th May: Stand to as usual at 0500hrs.

Within a couple of hours, the area of and around Suda Bay was un-

der bombardment. German Stukas were pinpointing anti-aircraft guns. General Freyberg stood on the hill observing, when: "...we suddenly became aware of a greater throbbing in the moments of comparative quiet, and, looking out to sea with the glasses, I picked out hundreds of planes tier on tier coming towards us-here were the huge slow-moving troop carriers with the loads we were expecting". (Freyburg, quoted in Long, Greece, Crete and Syria, p221)

Alf's Diary 1600hrs: IT'S ON! Whacko. Planes in 100's, smoke bombs and HE, MG. Let umbrella men come. Reg Johnstone killed. Paratroopers coming down in 1000s. Managed to get a Brenn, fired it until barrel got hot. Gliders coming in, troop carriers shot down. Not many of umbrella men landed alive. There was a great tendency to put more lead into them than was necessary. Even Bob talon, the cook, grabbed a rifle and said: 'I'm Tallon, the fighting cook'. All Battalion did their job nobly and well".

Alf picked up the story: "About 4pm we heard the drones coming in at sea level, next thing when they reached land and gained height (for a drop from 120 metres) the paratroopers were landing all amongst us".

The Battle of Crete saw the first large-scale airborne action in world history. Extract from 'Der Deutsche Fallschirmjager' 'The German Paratroopers Path of Sacrifice' By Alex Buchner. Translated By L. Lukic, MWAITI:

"The evening of the first battle day on Crete sank with a red bloody glow. The situation at 1 Air Corp's Staffquarters on the Greek mainland was still fairly obscure. The expected news of success had not come in. It was only evident that up to that time 9000 men had jumped according to plan and 4 beach heads had been formed. But not one of the airfields, needed for the transport of airborne troops, was in possession. The General Command began to realise that the enemy's resistance on Crete was considerably



Above: Crete conflict German paratroopers, May 20th 1941

stronger than anticipated'.

Alf was wounded during the defence of Heraklion. Under a white flag, a German Medical Officer brought two wounded paratroopers to Btn HQ to be treated by an Australian Doctor. Alf's first instinct was to shoot the German MO; but under the Geneva



Above: German plane May 20th 1941

Convention, this was not permitted. The CO concurred and the uninjured Officer was permitted to leave under the protection of a white flag. He returned safely to his men. Now, though, he could report on the Battalion's position, and sure enough, the following day, Alf's company was mortar bombed. The right side of Alf's skull was hit by shrapnel and caused damage to the optical nerve. (He later had a corneal implant as resulting blindness affected his right eye).

The Battle of Crete was hanging by a thread. Pockets of German paratroopers that had successfully landed on target, and airborne infantry that had been crash-landed into the hills, waited...

The New Zealander's held their positions around Maleme, with their well hidden artillery now adjusted to shell the airfield. Another fierce battle started near Rethymnon with non-stop bombing from German planes. Six JU52s dropped supplies intended for their own troops.

At Retimo, one of the defending patrols came across the body of a German Paratrooper with the colour signal codes used to message supply-carrying planes their requests. As plenty of German machine guns had been captured, the defenders of Crete requested ammunition to use; which was promptly dropped to them by (red) parachute!

Australian troops collected as much of the equipment as they could; Arms and ammunition (many of which were handed over to the fighting Greeks) desperately needed medical supplies, even motor bikes and a wireless set: tuned to German wavelengths. This proved to be a double-edged sword, as the reality of this situation was that the Germans dominated the sky. From the air, they were able to observe and maintain an efficient stream of supplies: an advantage that ultimately swung in their favour.

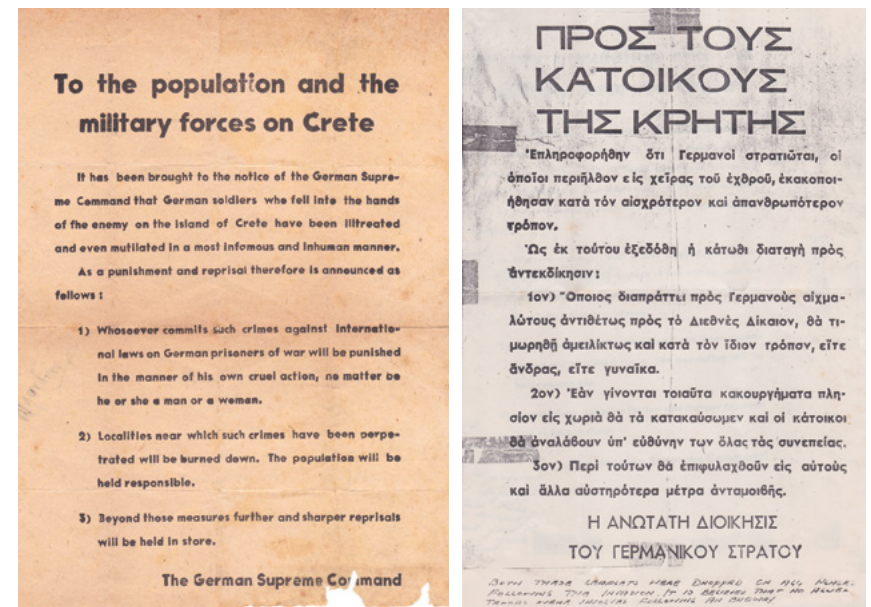
22nd and 23rd May: "Got a couple of Luges, one prize Nazi flag and German compasses. Collected medical supplies dropped by

Blenheim, taken into hospital. 16 Junkers over. Gear dropped into Jerry's hands this time. 11:20 Another bit of gear dropped west of town. Oh for a Hurricane or two! Jerry again collected 1700hrs. 40 Dorniers cleaned the town up. Bombs and MG. 6 Hurricanes arrived but left again. 30 Dorniers dropped their bombs".

The RAF acronym was changed to 'Rare As Fairies' by some Australian troops fighting in Greece. They felt there had been very little air support for them.

The King of Greece and his government were taken off Crete by two British Destroyers. There was an acceptance that the island had been lost.

The German Supreme Command dropped leaflets in their thousands, over Heraklion and Nea Alikarnassos, written in both Greek and English.



Above: German leaflets dropped over Crete

Naturally, the unexpected delivery of so much paper was put to good use by Australian troops on the ground. Having found the leaflets were not much good to use as cigarette papers, a more practical, toiletry, use seemed appropriate.

24th May: "0730 and isn't it on again. Bombs, MG and Paratroopers with stores. Whacko. Hurricanes down on aerodrome. Someone will get hurt here soon. Went through to aerodrome to get mortar ammo. Just 100 rounds. Sniper had a lash at us. MG and Bombers over all day. 1700hrs and all well".

25th May: "Continuous raid all day. MG and Bombers. Lester collected 100 rounds of mortar ammo. Through to ordinance to collect Jerry MGs, 4 of them".

26th May: "Awoke to the rattle of SAA. Plato's Platoon cut off".

Australian and New Zealand battalions formed a defensive line along the Hania to Tsikslaria road (Tsikalarion) south-east of Chania, forming a rearguard for the withdrawing troops. Although they were profoundly understrength, the defensive line they formed provided enough cover to not only assist troops in their withdrawal, but also to cause the Germans to withdraw for a brief period. ANZACs carried out a bayonet charge on advancing enemy troops. This action briefly halted the German troops.

"Our men were all lined up, ready to fight the way out. Sgt Swanson (Teddy) led the charge through. The noise of that charge was blood-curdling! I got a Brenn gun to give them covering fire and we got that platoon back to the lines again, so we reinforced each other. One lot of German paratroopers was in a wheat field, so we put petrol on the windward side and set fire to it. They came out with their hands up. If any of them fired, we fired".

At this stage the Germans on Ames Bridge were in a strong position and posed a very serious threat. Australian patrols continued

to gather as much information as possible, but were told to withdraw if threatened, in order to best defend Heraklion aerodrome.

Extract from 'Forgotten Anzacs' by Peter Ewer: 'The Germans... blundered onto an ANZAC position that was held in depth by men who still longed for an opportunity to extract some revenge for their own ordeals. ...On the centre left at 42nd Street, next to the Maori Battalion, and he witnessed there one of the most remarkable sights in Anzac history:

'It was about 11 in the morning, we were sitting around a well drinking water, so thirsty. Then bloody hell let loose-the Huns had come down this valley until they came to us, troops walking around. I was next to a detachment of Maoris...and this Maori boy got up with a Bren magazine, and did a Haka! How he wasn't shot down I'll never know-the leaves were being shot off the trees above, everyone should have been shot down, just one of those things. Up got the Maoris, and we went with them, the Huns were only 100 metres away. Well they couldn't stop us, they got up and ran, and we just shot them, chased them a mile'.

More and more German troops and supplies were dropped onto the Island.

Alf took up the story: "Next thing we got an order through dispatch rider to say we were abandoning the island. Our section was clear, the aerodrome was clear, but other strategic zones had been taken and now there were Messerschmitts landing additional troops. We were to prepare for a night withdrawal by ship at 3am".

Part of the preparation to evacuate Crete involved laying anti-personnel mines and leaving as little as possible that could be of use to the Germans: preferably without them being aware of the Allied troops movements.

The ANZACs joined the columns of withdrawing troops as they

travelled south. The evacuation of Crete had been authorised and our troops traversed the White Mountains, heading for Sfakia, where the heroic Mediterranean Fleet could, again, facilitate a mass evacuation of Allied troops.

Extract from 'White Over Green':

"To fill in the gap from the time our positions were vacated, until we were well clear of Heraklion, rifles were rigged up in such a way that at intervals falling cans of water attached to the triggers with string would cause them to fire and so give the impression that we were still occupying our positions'.

These tactics worked well. Later that day, only hours after the troops had left, the Germans launched an attack on their positions. This time, they were too late.

From the huge sacrifice and misery of war grew lasting bonds of love, gratitude and the utmost respect. Ordinary Greeks did extraordinary things to help their allies.

The Flowers of Rethymnon By Lew Lind

'These flowers of Rethymnon grow taller in those places where Australian soldiers died in the Battle of Crete.

Their blood is mingled with the sacred soil of Crete.

These quiet places have never been ploughed

And never will be ploughed.

They are sacred to all Cretans forever.'

CHAPTER SIX

For the second time in just a few weeks, Alf was being evacuated.

On the night of 28th/29th May 1941 a force of 4,500 Allied troops were hastily but smoothly evacuated from Heraklion. HMS *Orion* led HM Ships *Ajax*, *Dido*, *Decoy*, *Jackal*, *Imperial*, *Hotspur*, *Kimberley* and *Hereward*, under the flag of Admiral Sir Bernard Rawlings.

Alf describes what happened: "We got aboard *HMS Imperial*, but then found one platoon hadn't shown up, so our Colonel managed to get the ship's captain to wait until 3:30 am. That half an hour made all the difference, as our stragglers arrived so then we left on the ship. Now though, the sun was coming up; dive bombers started coming down on us. That extra half an hour of waiting for stragglers made our evacuation by sea even more fraught with danger. That's what the captain had been trying to avoid.

The Luftwaffe remorselessly attacked the Fleet.

"*Hotspur* was packed full of withdrawing troops, there was standing room only. We still had our weapons though, so any bombers that came at us got everything we had.

The captain of *Imperial* commanded the crew to keep zig-zagging in the water to avoid the bombs being dropped, but one landed so close to *Imperial*, she was lifted out of the water. The boatswain reported damage and we were taking water fast: her steering gear broke down and it became clear that *Imperial* wouldn't make it to Alexandria. Semaphore flags relayed an urgent message to nearby *Hotspur*. She came alongside and we jumped ship. Some men missed the jump".

Imperial was torpedoed by *Hotspur* to prevent her being used by the Germans.

Private Alexander Webb of the 2/4th Battalion had been asleep below decks when the torpedoes hit *Imperial*. He managed to dive off just before she sank. He clung to a piece of wreckage and floated back to Crete, where he was picked up by the Germans and became a prisoner of war.

Orion, although severely damaged, her captain dead and 500 dead between decks, survived to limp into Alexandria. Lieutenant Atwill's first hand account graphically recalls the tribute paid by the Navy in the Greek and Crete Campaigns.

'Shortly before noon, two Fulmars of the Fleet Air Arm made contact with the Squadron, and, although a few more attacks were made, they did no damage. Himself wounded, Admiral Rawlings brought his shattered squadron safely back to Alexandria at 2000 that night - just 26 hours after we had sailed. Orion had two rounds of main armament left, no anti-aircraft ammunition, and only ten tons of fuel. She had lost her Captain, eighty-two of her ships company and some three to four hundred of the soldiers we had snatched from the hands of the enemy. Orion had filled the breach'.

Alf's Diary 30th May 1941: "Arrived at Amariya station at 0500hrs with a sigh of relief. 700 lives lost in evacuation. Fed and received clothes. Still got a Hun tommy gun and Luger revolver. Brazier, McDougal amongst killed. Got into a bottle or two of good old Aussie beer".

"We took 1100 men into Greece. At muster in Alexandria there were 400".

John Hetherington, war correspondent of the Sydney Sun reported: *'I saw today the end of one of the most gallant chapters of*

British history, when tired and bearded men, Australians, New Zealanders and Tommies-marched down the gangways of the warships in which they had been evacuated from Crete.

I had seen these Australians fight winning battles in Libya, a losing battle in Greece and today was their finest hour.

They were flung from Greece by superior weight of men and superior weight of armaments, but in courage-that indefinable thing these men call guts-they were never defeated.

They are not defeated now. They don't know the meaning of defeat".

Alf's diary 31st May: "May move to Palestine today or tomorrow. Entraining at Ikingi Mariut at 1900hrs for Gaza".

1st June: "Arrived Kilo 89, great welcome from Johnno, then onto trucks for Julius area camp.

2nd June: "Camp life very quiet. Battalion Parade 1400hrs, will have Sgt's mess in order tomorrow".

'This day by day diary is as I recorded it in a small pocket diary carried throughout the campaign. Naturally, it only contains records that would be of importance to me as RSM and of my feelings at the day of recording.'

There were around 3102 Australians taken prisoner on Greece and 1692 New Zealanders. They would spend the next four years in German Stalags. Behind them, 274 Australians and 671 New Zealanders lay in Cretan graves.

CHAPTER SEVEN

On 17th February 1942, Alf Carpenter embarked on 'SS Rajula' at Port Tewfiq for passage back to Australia. It was a little over two years since the 2/4th Battalion had first arrived in Palestine. For those troops returning home, the building sense of adventure they had felt when they left on *Strathnaver* in 1940 had changed to the weary experience of war veterans.

They had left many of their mates behind. Six hundred and forty six Australians were killed during the Battle of Crete and the Greek Campaign. An estimated 250 were held as Prisoners of War in various German camps. A staggering 4-5000 Australian, New Zealand and British soldiers were in hiding in the hills and countryside of Greece, after they had become trapped behind enemy lines. With little or no food or supplies, they received help from the Greek villagers: people who had nothing and were in peril themselves but still selflessly risked their own lives in support of those that had risked theirs in the defence of Greece.

The Rajula berthed at Colombo for two days, where the boys had to stay on board in sweltering heat, surrounded by the 'bum boats' of locals who competed for their business. Haggling for trinkets, that were moved from bum boat to ship by lengths of rope, created a diversion for the men onboard as they waited for their ship's stores to be replenished.

Arona, Dilwara, Takwila, Nevasa, two tankers and the escort of HMS Ramillies and HMAS Hobart joined Rajula in convoy for the final leg of the homeward journey.

For the returning troops, there could be no great welcome home on familiar foreshores: Australia was at war with Japan. Conse-

quently, leave was not granted immediately for the men. As they prepared for their next operational move, these now hugely experienced fighting men were once more back in training.

This era was a distinctly different phase to the first year of active service overseas in North Africa and the Middle East. 1940 to 1942 had involved land operations in dust and desert, then European operations in Greece and Crete. 1942 to the end of the war comprised of mainly jungle operations, so each phase demanded radically different types of training.

On 24th May, Alf moved to Larrakeyah Barracks in Darwin to commence garrison duties. Imminent attack by Japanese forces was expected. On 19th February they had carried out a devastating attack on the top end, in which 243 people were killed. The Japanese veterans of Pearl Harbour had assessed Darwin base, with its naval and merchant ships, American airbases and military personnel, as a potential threat to their operations against Timor and Java.

One of the Japanese bombing attacks hit Larrakeyah Barracks. Alf was then moved to 67 Mile Strip, one of a series of camps along the main highway, where landing strips (for emergency landings) were along one side of the highway, and army camps were established on the other.

Darwin was subjected to a further 63 bombing raids, intermittently, until November 1943. None were as devastating as this first one.

Darwin's defences were strengthened and better organised, with American, Australian and British fighters, including Spitfires that had become famous in the Battle of Britain, deployed to defend the base. It was a major port for the Navy and a major base for the Army, including Australia's commando units that operated behind Japanese lines.

During the next few months, Alf was a Regimental Sergeant Major on detachment at the small arms school in Bonegilla Camp in Victoria. Here, groups of soldiers in transit were garrisoned and specialist units underwent training. By this stage of the war there was a greater presence of women, serving with the Australian Women's Army Service, and the nurses amongst them received soldiers directly from the front line. Exhaustion, Malaria and TB military patients made up a huge percentage of their charges at 106 General Hospital.

On one of the Tuesday night recreation events in June a bus, that carried troops, was hit by a train at the Tallangatta Road to Wodronge crossing. The bus driver and twenty-three servicemen and women were killed, and nine injured. This was the worst railway-road smash in Australia.

Alf was selected for officer training and successfully completed No 7 Course, Officer Cadet Training at Woodside, South Australia. Bert Chowne, was also on this course. Bert had been a company runner in 2/13th Bn and served in the Middle East at the same time as Alf. Bert was killed during the Aitape-Wewak campaign in 1945. He was awarded the Victoria Cross posthumously for his actions.

In April 1944 Alf was appointed Lieutenant, and attached to the Jungle Warfare School at Canungra in Queensland, for three months as an Instructor.

"Marge joined me there. She had a flat in Sydney at that time, and worked as secretary to the manager at Lysarts. She stayed at the Canungra Hotel. I joined her at the hotel at night, when I'd completed my work, then got back to base for 0600hrs parade. I must have been fit!"

In June 1944, Alf transferred to 2/3rd Pioneer Battalion as Platoon Commander. (As was usual following a Commission, Alf

was posted to another unit). Colonel Chesterman from Water Transport HQ interviewed Alf and was very keen to have him. So, Alf was detached to the 42nd Landing Craft Company as Adjutant, training at Trinity Beach, Cairns.

From Alf's notes: 'I feel some events during my service as a member of 42nd Landing Craft Company may be of interest to 'Log Book' members of Water Transport'.

"I arrived at Trinity Beach to find the 42nd Landing Craft Company in an exercise with Infantry Battalions and the Beach Officer signaled for a 25ft Fast Supply Launch to pick me up to watch the exercise by anchoring some 300 yards off shore, no doubt to try out my 'sea legs' and stomach-passed with flying colours.

After the exercise I was formally introduced and welcomed by the CO, Rodger Chester, and summoned by the Lieutenant of Transport Group HQs for instructions. Apparently he was not too happy with the administration of the 42nd, which I took on board and cleared up.

Time at Trinity Beach was taken up with learning the ropes of Water Transport, with night navigation exercises to the Endeavour River at Cooktown and the Johnstone River at Innisfail. Taking nurses to Green Island and Low Island at Port Douglas etc. We had an Officers' Cook at the time of Italian descent and one day the Corporal of the Guard raced into the Orderly Room informing me that the cook had gone mad and was racing down to the anchorage brandishing his cook's knife. I raced down to find the cook waist deep in the fish trap, slashing flaps off a large sting ray. These he cooked up and served with mayonnaise for a special delightful meal.

The trip to Bougainville on board the 'Sharnee' was without incident, embarking at Torokina Bay for the 42nd Base on Pupuata

Island. The Island had been an American 'Sea Bees' Base and still had some occupancy by them.

Now, some of the experiences during the 42nd stay there”!

While serving on Bougainville, Alf participated in the landing at Buka Passage, in a 25-foot fast supply launch, with barges full of Infantry Battalion.

Alf shares this experience: “Our purpose was to land supplies and Infantry on the beach either side of Buka Passage. Intelligence reported that no Jap’s were there, and we were clear to enter the zone. As soon as we landed at the beach, with the ramps down, all hell broke loose! Japs were shooting 25lb artillery at us from all directions! Japs were occupying the land and we were in their sights. My launch was blown up. Next thing I know, I’m in the water so started swimming out to sea, along with another bloke, Lewis. We had no idea if we’d be rescued, so trod water and chatted to pass the time. Turned out we’d both been in retail prior to our military service. We both agreed that if we got out of this alive, we’d go into business together”.

“We were there to take over from the American Commando Battalions on Puriata Island, just off from Torokina Bay on the island. The CO, Major Roger Chester and I didn’t always see eye to eye. He was an Engineer: I was an Infantryman! He sent me off to train as a Bomb Disposal Officer. Think he may have been trying to get rid of me; but it didn’t work anyhow: I qualified as a Bomb Disposal Officer and returned to the Island”.

Alf’s next move was to relinquish his appointment as Adjutant. He was appointed Workshop OFFA. “The CO was having trouble with a section of personnel there, and I was posted to sort out the discipline. We took on strength a Navy Lieutenant Cowan as Navigation Officer. He had been on Motor Torpedo Boats in the English Channel during the Blitz, and was attached to us for recreational



Above: Bougainville craft beached after cyclone. May 1945

leave. His nerves were a bit shot up.

Major Chester had somehow acquired some LCPs (Landing Craft Personnel) from the Yanks at Vella Lavella and Munda Islands and sent Lt Cowan and myself out with sufficient crews to bring them back to Bougainville, a distance of about 160 sea miles. We spent a couple of days making four of them somewhat seaworthy, and, to quote the Yanks: ‘We would not take them outside the harbour’! We took off in the early hours of the morning, hoping to make it to Bougainville before dark-seas calm-all went fairly well until the afternoon tropical storm set in about 1600hrs with a vengeance. High seas, coxswains sea sick, jumping from launch to barges to relieve coxswains worst cases, and as the storm abated we were relieved to see the Volcano on Bougainville appear on the horizon. We had to approach to the left of the volcano, to the right was ‘Jap’ occupied. Not a bad trip navigated with a hand-held compass by Lt Cowan. He certainly knew his job.

We were having problems with reconditioned motors seizing up when over-revving was required when reversing off beaches.

Sam Brent was an experienced welder and between us we designed a 'Test Bench' with two motors in tandem. In front, a 'run-in' motor hooked up with a new reconditioned motor with the spark plugs removed to be kept turning over for 8 hours or so, after which the process was reversed. This seemed to overcome the problem.

On another occasion the word had passed around that the Yanks were dumping cartons of beer out to sea. So, out to sea a barge was dispatched to take some aboard. Now, hot beer was not my choice, so I assembled the Platoon and all agreed to stack an acquired fridge (just charged with new gas) with a few cartons and to return to their duties until after the evening mess parade, when a workshop party would commence. Who cared if the beer was outdated? Now, the Yank beer was only 2% strength and after a few, the nearby coconut tree was being well watered. The kidneys sure had a flush out”!

Alf's interest in 'home brew' may have had a few pointers at this stage...

Excerpt from 'Up North' Pilgrims Handbook 1945-1995:

Alf recalled: “ ...how 'jungle juice' was fermented by placing five gallon drums of dried apricots in 44 gallon drums of water. The workshop section constructed a still for the juice. After consuming some of this jungle juice, Sergeant Bill Bethune, a coxswain on a barge doing ship-to-shore transports, managed to plough straight into an American Liberty ship...”

“The Officers Mess decided to arrange a formal dinner night and invited some of the nurses from the AGH as our guests. Our MO had brewed up some 'egg nog' with egg powder and a tinge of medicinal alcohol to make the drink more palatable. The dinner was in full swing when one of the mess orderlies informed me that a brother of mine was out in the kitchen and would like to see me. I thought someone was pulling my leg and having me on so decide

to ignore it. Some time later the orderly gave me the same message and said 'Don't you want to see him? He's in the Navy'. Sure enough, it was my brother, Eric, who had been posted to 'Special Signals' on Bougainville, translating 'Jap' signals to English for the powers that be. I had not seen Eric for some time, last time was at Point Cook in Melbourne when I called in to see him on my way to Bonegilla. In the early hours of the morning I had to get Eric back to his unit, he had only just arrived that day and was not sure where it was. Just on daylight we found his base, got the Jeep and Barge safely back to Puruata.”.

“Then there is the well documented story in 'Sailors in Slouch Hats' of the 42nd 'Operation Porton', when Capt. Stuart Leslie, and others, on the 8th June 1945 transported a company of the 31/51 Battalion and their evacuation on the 9th June 1945, with several casualties. Now, the day war ended in the Pacific I was bedridden with malaria and Dengue Fever. Lt Ted Lewis informed us of the news and handed me a glass half full of rum. One sip was enough. I was too crook and knocked the rest back. I sweated it out in my sick bed”.

Alf's last military appointment was as Deputy Assistant Quarter Master General of the Northern Territory Force. By now though, wife Marge had had enough. Alf was given an ultimatum: 'I have looked after two kids during your time in the Army. Please decide whether it's us, or the Army'. Two months later, in April, Alf's duty terminated.

For Alf, the choice was clear. Alfred Clive Carpenter applied for discharge on 4th April 1946. On 6th June 1946, he was transferred to the Reserve of Officers.

Alf had served for more than twelve years and had been in the thick of some of WWIIs fiercest battles.

He was not yet thirty years old.



Above: Staff School Grade III Wing-Course 6 CABARLAH' Alf in middle row, 4th from left. 18th September 1945-20th November 1945.

