

Alfred James Farmer was born at Invercargill 20<sup>th</sup> October 1919. Alf's mother Ivy Burness Grey was born in Southland in 1895. Her mother Jessie Grey (nee Calder) was born in Drummond, Southland. Ivy's father Glassford Grey was born in Scotland. Jessie's parents were both born in Scotland. Jesse's father Alexander Calder came to New Zealand and his first job was helping to form the main street of Dunedin. Alexander had a good friend named Gabriel Reid who discovered gold in Otago at what was to become known as Gabriel's Gully. The first person he told about it was Alexander and the two were to form a partnership taking supplies to the gold fields for the miners. Alexander made enough money to purchase land out of Dunedin which he broke in as a farm. He built a large two storey house on the property and called the farm Calderville. Deciding he now wanted a wife he took a ship back to Scotland.

It was a fishing town in Scotland that Alexander saw 3 girls walking along the beach. One dropped her scarf but by the time he picked it up they had disappeared. Alexander took the scarf to the town cryer who went around the town with a loud voice calling for the owner. The girl's mother claimed the scarf and Alexander requested if he could court her daughter. They were later married and he took his new bride to New Zealand. They were to have 11 children. After they retired from the farm they moved to Invercargill where they are both buried in the Great Eastern cemetery.

Alf's mother Ivy met an American citizen, True Alfred Farmer, and they were married in Invercargill. True's father, whose name was Alfred James Farmer had been born in southern England and had emigrated to Arkansas, USA where he made a considerable amount of money as a car salesman and then he went into real estate. Ivy and True were to have 4 children. Ula was the oldest girl and then Alfred. Both were born in Invercargill and then the family moved to Queenstown for 2 years, after which they moved to Oregon, USA where Vida and Jessie were born. Ula and Jessie were to both die in the flu epidemic in the 1920's.

To encourage True to settle the his parents bought him a chicken farm in Oregon. Unfortunately he was not one to settle and left the family and was last heard of in Alaska. Ivy left the farm and returned the family back to New Zealand.

Ivy's mother Jessie who was separated took a lease of a boarding house in Ohai, a small coal mining town about 80 kilometres north east of Invercargill. Ivy took Alf and Vida with her and assisted in the boarding house. They also employed a woman named Alva.

The boarding house which was owned by the coal mine was one of the few buildings to have power on. The local houses generally only had kerosene lamps and a coal range for cooking. At one stage they fed up to 50 miners although the miners had their own huts to live in. When the depression came the miners went baching or were unemployed and so the number to feed dropped to about 5 which was not enough to keep the boarding house going. Ivy's sister Myrtle and her husband Dick had moved to Auckland so Jessie along with Ivy and Vida decided also to move to Auckland.

Alf started school at Ohai at the age of 5 years. This was to be his only school as it went through to standard 6. Alf was to be a bright pupil (his words) who received a prize every year. Generally the prize was a book awarded to the first five pupils in each year. Every two children had a plot of land about 5 metres x 3 metres where they grew vegetables which the school then sold for funds. There was not a greengrocer in Ohai. George Andrews who had come from Balclutha was his teacher in standards 5 and 6. George wanted to know what it was like to receive the strap so he asked the class who was prepared to come up and give it to him. Up shot Alf's arm and then he realized he was the only one to do so. He pulled his hand back down but it was too late. He had to go up and give the strap to Mr. Andrews. Of course it was a pathetic hit so the teacher went over to the fire and made out he was hardening the leather. Everyone gave Alf a hard time later. In the primers Alf swore at a girl so the head mistress washed his mouth out with soap and water. Alf claims he never really liked school but he never wagged classes either.

One day Alf actually locked the whole school in. There were doors at each end of the main block and Alf locked these and then went home. Next morning he was called out by the headmaster and given 6 straps to the hand. The headmasters name was John Martin, who the kids nick named "Bull". He had a small

daughter who was cheeky to Alf and when she asked Alf his name he replied Tommy Pepper. Thereafter she always called him Tommy Pepper. The headmaster was also Alf's standard 3 and 4 teacher and years later Alf was to meet him in the middle east during the war where he was the pay master at the army main camp base. At school Alf enjoyed playing cricket in the summer and rugby in the winter. He played on the wing in rugby as he was a fast runner up to about 50 metres. Often the school would organize a bus trip for the day to Invercargill or Bluff. Alf sat and passed the proficiency examination when he turned 14 and then he left school.

Out of school he spent a lot of time catching rabbits. This was his only source of pocket money and he would get from 6 pence to 2 shillings and 6 pence for the skins depending on the condition and colour. He would bundle the skins up and the bus driver would deliver them into the dealer in Invercargill who would then post out a cheque. The summer skins which had a blue tinge did not fetch much but the winter skins were the best. Some of the rabbits would make their homes in the mines in the winter for the warmth and these skins were not so good either. Alf would set the rabbit traps in the evening and then check them first thing in the morning. He also used ferrets to catch the rabbits. He would peg a net over the bolt holes and then put a ferret down the main hole. He could hear the rabbits racing underground and then they would charge out and get caught in the net. If there were no bolt holes he would not put the ferret down as it would eat a rabbit and then go to sleep. With these burrows Alf would use a spade to dig the rabbit out. His favourite rabbits were the coloured ones. Yellow, black, and grey/white (Piebald) which he would keep and take home for pets.

He would also catch hares although these could only be caught with dogs as hares do not go underground. Hares and greyhound dogs are used in a game called coursing. At one end of a paddock the size of a football field they set up a long timber fence with escape holes cut in which the hares are shown through. At the other end the hares are let go and quickly followed by the greyhounds. The hare does not have enough time to get to the escape hole in a straight line as the dogs are given points for the number of turns a hare makes. Most times the hare gets there first. It is the total points that the men bet on.

Although Alf never owned dogs himself one of the boarders Jimmy Moffat had 2 greyhounds named Ruby C and Tommy C for racing and Alf used to take the dogs for training runs using Jimmy's bike. They would strain at the leash and pull the bike with Alf a few miles each time. They were fed on steak and eggs and used for coursing. Jimmy's other dog was a lurcher, which is a cross between a border collie and a greyhound, named Pat. Pat spent most of his time with Alf and was very clever. He could catch a rabbit without it being killed and insisted on carrying an egg in his mouth when Alf was bringing the eggs in from the hen house. One day Jimmy Moffat and another man who owned a retriever had a bet for a bottle of whiskey as to which was the most intelligent dog. They set up a hat, newspaper and a tobacco tin then told each dog what they had to fetch. Both dogs were successful. Then they borrowed Alf's rugby ball and kicked it away. Pat was told to fetch first. He started to nudge the ball back but of course it would not roll straight. He then noticed a small piece of lace which he picked up in his teeth and stumbled back with the ball. The owner of the retriever conceded that his dog could not do that and paid up the whiskey.

As a boy Alf would catch trout. Although it was illegal he would walk quietly along the river bank and then quickly throw the spear into the trout. He and a friend Jack Flynn would fish together. Jack was to become a policeman and many years later in the 1970s Alf called to see Jack at the local police station. On answering the door Jack said not a word but took Alf inside to the fridge, showed him some trout, and said with a smile "and these ones were caught legally". He then greeted Alf and shook his hand.

Alf also speared eels. There were both silver belly eels which did not grow very big and were edible although Alf never did eat them, and the big mud eels. One big mud eel was lying near the surface by a small water fall and Alf jumped from the bank straddling the eel and stuck his spear into it at the same time. He said it was so big when he dragged it ashore it hardly put up a fight where normally eels will wrap themselves around the spear and can be difficult to handle.

His first bicycle was a Monarch which his mother bought for him. It cost six pounds and ten shillings. He was about ten years old and he rigged up a bell which could run continuously from the back wheel.

Grandmother Jessie purchased a bach (in the South Island they are called cribs) at the mouth of the Waiau river. The river starts at Lake Manapouri in Fiordland National Park and skirts the Takitimu mountains, then goes through Tuatapere before discharging into Foveaux Strait. Waiau river was good for trout fishing and you could catch perch on the seaward side of the river mouth. The bach was only one room about 6 metres x 4 metres including a small kitchen. Uncle Glover who was Ivy's brother stayed for many years at the boarding house and he had a motor car which he used as a taxi and also took the family to the bach for holidays. Glover was a farrier and loved horses. He had been in the Otago cavalry regiment at the western front during the first world war and was later to be involved in training race horses, mostly trotters.

While at school Alf's only job in the boarding house was to keep it supplied in coal. He would walk to the mine about 500 metres away and take from the conveyor belt the coal he required. The boarding house had 5 fire places and a coal range (No.4. Orian with a built in hot water cylinder). None of these were ever left to go out. He had to supply smaller pieces of coal for day use and a large block for each night. This amounted to about 3 to 4 sacks each day.

Grandmother Jessie had many chickens which were free to run at the back of the boarding house. They were fed on scraps and wheat and Alf used to hunt around outside the hen house where they often built nests and laid eggs. Sometimes there would be up to 10 eggs in these nests as well as in the hen house. Both Alf and his mate Jack Grinlay had a bantam rooster with 2 hens. Sometimes they would put the 2 roosters together and there would be a terrible fight. They would not let it go on very long in case they got caught and punished or the roosters were hurt.

After leaving school Alf's first job over the Christmas period was picking up sheep fleece in a shearing shed. There were two "picker uppers" who would pick up the fleece and lay it over a table. He was employed by the Mt Linton farm where he received board and twenty five shillings a week. The season was short but they worked from dawn to dark seven days a week. It was extremely hard work. Alf was to go on and work for 2 weeks at another farm before getting a job back at Ohai coal mine.

At 14 years old his position at the mine was to dump the dross coal. This involved having a horse pull a cart down a slope into a swamp where he would open the side of the cart and spill the dross out. Dross being the coal impurities was left to continually burn away. He worked at this until he turned 15 when he went onto the permanent night shift at the mine. Although he started at 4 p.m. he was often finished about 6 or 6.30 p.m. and paid an 8 hour shift. Each box of the day shift coal held about 11 cwt and they had to be taken out and emptied onto a conveyor belt which then took the coal to be screened and graded. Once the empty boxes were put back in the mine ready for the next day Alf could go home. He worked in the mines for about 4 years.

As his grandmother, mother and sister had moved to Auckland Alf decided to pay them a visit. With a friend Ivan Church they went on holiday and Alf enjoyed Auckland so much he decided not to go back. Alf owed the local garage 25 shillings to repair the front wheel of his bike and he told Ivan that if he paid the bill he could have the bike. Alf then moved into the flat in Jervois Road with his mother and sister. For the first 3 weeks he did a bread delivery round for his uncle Roy while Roy had a holiday. He then did another 3 weeks while another bread man went on holiday. Alf then joined the army as a special reserve for a full time five month course based at Narrow Neck. Staying in the army barracks they trained every day on the guns at North Head. This was to finish about June 1939.

It was during the course that he was on leave with Len Owens and Mort Freeman that they met 3 girls when walking up Queen Street. Len knew one of the girls and so introductions were done all around. One of the girls, Anne, was later to become Alf's wife. Anne worked at a shoe factory in Eden Terrace and Alf used to wait and meet her after work. Anne lived with her sister Maria who was married and living in New Lynn. Sometimes Alf was to miss the last bus and would have to walk back to the city from New Lynn.

When the army course finished Alf went with a friend Robbie who had a job on A.B. William's sheep station at Te Puia which is out of Tokomau and Tolaga Bays north of Gisborne. Alf worked on the station

for about six weeks before hearing on the radio that all special reserves were being called up and he was to report back to the army. This was 3 days before Britain declared war on Germany. Travelling back to Gisborne Alf was given a free rail warrant to go by service car to Auckland. There he rejoined the army at Narrow Neck. Initially Alf was too young to go overseas and although he tried to get away the army were aware of his age and he was held back and used to train new recruits at North Head. In the meantime he continued to take Anne out. Finally he was sent to Burnham camp out of Christchurch to prepare to go overseas. While there he had his 21<sup>st</sup> birthday and guard duty both on the same day. He was given his final leave back to Auckland and then told to return to Burnham camp because of the threat of Japan coming into the war. He was then given his 2<sup>nd</sup> final leave and returned to Auckland where he and Anne were married. Again he went back to Burnham and was again given another final leave back to Auckland. Finally on returning to Christchurch they were sent to Wellington and departed on the New Amsterdam, 36000 tons, for the middle east and war.

Sailing with the fourth reinforcements they called at Sydney to join a convoy bound for Bombay via Fremantle. The troops had 3 days ashore in Fremantle before moving on to Bombay in India. As there was a shortage of ships they were to spend 3 weeks in Bombay at a British army rest camp about 100 kilometres inland. Alf was an acting sergeant at this stage and was required to daily take about 130 troops on a compulsory route march. He was very annoyed that because of the heat none of the officers would go, therefore after about one hour he would stop the men and form circles. The local Indians who had been following would come up and when the troops had put enough money in the middle they would have a fight between a snake and a mongoose. Usually the mongoose would win but if the snake wrapped itself around it the Indian would pull them apart as he had plenty of snakes but only one mongoose. Alf told the men that if anyone informed on them back at base he would be in trouble and of course their route marches would start again. No one did.

Leaving Bombay they sailed on a ship that Kaiser William had had built for himself during the first world war. He had intended to tour the world after Germany won the war but instead England claimed it after they won. The native crew were highly amused when the troops had a compulsory dangle parade to be inspected by the doctor as they sailed for the Suez canal. After reaching Suez they were taken off the ship and travelled by truck to base camp at Maadi which is out of Cairo.

On arriving at Maadi Alf dropped a stripe to Corporal and went into an NCO refresher course. The rest of the reinforcements went to Greece where they were kicked out by Germany, then to Crete where again Germany pushed them out, and finally back to Egypt. Of the 40 men in his original mortar platoon only 4 returned. After the NCO course Alf decided that he did not want his stripes and would prefer to be a private with his mates. He rejoined no 3 mortar platoon in the 18<sup>th</sup> battalion and the whole division went to Helwan which was another camp in the desert. They stayed there while the division recovered from the Greek campaign and then went and camped on the bank of the Suez canal. It was there that he received a letter from Anne informing him that they had not realized when he left New Zealand that she was pregnant with Jim. They had a party in the tent that night.

Leaving Suez they were sent to relieve Trobruk and saw action at Balhamed out of Tripoli. It was while in a slit trench there that he received a near hit from a shell that picked him up out of his slit trench and deposited him back down on the level ground as the trench had been filled in by the blast. His biggest concern was being fired on while he ran around looking for a spare trench. The blast was close enough to break his watch and canvas strap. Because of the rocky desert the trenches were very shallow and were generally dug by the engineers at night. At Balhamed the N Z troops retreated in front of a superior German force. As they ran back Alf noticed a German tank crew setting up a machine gun post and then the tank fired its main gun. A soldier in front of Alf lost his head but his body kept running quite away before dropping. Alf made it over the escarpment which was being held by the Royal Horse Artillery before the machine gun opened up. As the English always dug larger slit trenches than the Kiwis the N Z troops were able to share not only a trench but also the English provisions as their own had been left behind. Alf was lying beside the Royal Horse soldier when their own machine guns began firing over their heads from behind. They could do nothing but lie there even though they knew the Germans were approaching. Eventually the Germans were beaten back.

Trobruk was finally relieved but they had received a lot of shrapnel landing around them from anti-aircraft fire while camped outside. Leaving Trobruk they returned to the Suez canal. It was about this time that Japan attacked Pearl Harbour and America was now in the war.

From Suez they were sent by truck to Baalbek which is an old Roman ruins in Syria. It was thought that Germany would attack down through Syria from Turkey and the 4<sup>th</sup> New Zealand brigade were sent to relieve an Australian division which was returning home as Japan was now in the war. It was in training there that they received word that Rommel had attacked Egypt and had badly mauled the English 8<sup>th</sup> army out of Tripoli. All the kiwi markings were removed from their trucks and they were supposed to travel secretly back through Cairo to Alexandria. However every where they went the local natives would say "Hello Kiwi, how are you?" So much for a secret! Travelling through Cairo they camped at a little village on the Mediterranean and then went on to meet Rommel at Minqar Qain. The New Zealanders held the Germans up long enough for the English 8<sup>th</sup> army to regroup at El Alamein but eventually the whole division was surrounded by German troops and Rommel expected them to surrender. Then at night the 19<sup>th</sup> battalion led a bayonet attack which broke through the German lines and there were trucks available to take them to El Alamein. The 19<sup>th</sup> had been closely followed by the 18<sup>th</sup> battalion and Alf was pleased to be out of there. Casualties were heavy on both sides and many New Zealanders were taken prisoner.

The 4<sup>th</sup> Brigade had held their section of the line at El Alamein for 14 weeks before being relieved by the Essex battalion from England. During the day Alf spent lying in a 300mm deep slit trench that had been cut out of the stony ground by the engineers at night. He had a pet lizard about 150mm long which he would feed flies until it got such a big pot belly it could eat no more. The engineers had cut out a trench about 3 metres square and 500mm deep and one person at a time could run there at midday and make a cup of tea. When finished he would then yell "next" and another trooper would run in. The German line was only about 600 metres away and they would not bother with one soldier running but if there were two on their feet then they would open fire. Obviously they could move very little during the day as there was a lot of periodic firing but at night they could move around. Alf had been very fit and a slim 9 stone at the start of El Alamein but after 14 weeks of army bully beef morning and night he was 7 stone when they were relieved. El Alamein was a dirty place with the army stationary for so long. There was a problem with human excrement, body parts from shelling, and because of the desert heat during the day flies were to be a major problem. This was to be the end of his time as an infantry man as they were to be taken back to Maadi base camp and converted to tanks. Apparently General Fryberg had decided that New Zealand could not rely on Britain for heavy armament and therefore must have its own.

After making their way back through their own laid mine field behind them they were each given 2 bottles of Canadian beer. Alf whipped the top off both bottles but was only half way through the first when he got dysentery and was promptly sick at the same time. He was taken to the New Zealand field hospital and found to have yellow jaundice and so was sent to a convalescence camp in Palestine. He was there about 12 days when he and a good friend Rolf Sheriffs, known as Sherry, decided to go into Hafia on holiday. They did not have leave but arranged for another chap to answer for them at roll call. Apparently he answered for a week and then decided to stop with the consequence that when the two returned they were immediately charged with being AWOL for one week. Sherry was the first to go before the Colonel and decided to argue and for that he received 2 weeks confined to barracks. When he came out he told Alf not to argue and so Alf went in and said nothing. He got one week confined to barracks.

Alf then returned to the 18<sup>th</sup> battalion at Helwan for training in mobile armour. This was mainly mechanical and engineering in tanks but also included armoured cars. At the end of the course he was promoted from Private to Trooper and offered a position as driver to the sergeant mechanic responsible for keeping the tanks mobile both during and after action. Alf drove an armoured car which besides having the sergeant had an electrical engineer and a radio repair man. The car had an American 112 HP Hercules engine and instead of rear half tracks it had 4 wheel drive with a top speed of 70 mph. Their only armament was a 50 mm Browning machine gun. The car was only ever stuck once when it slid sideways down a bank and became lodged between two trees, one in the front and one behind. Alf had to get one of the tanks to pull the tree out and then tow him out. He said that he preferred being in the armoured car to tanks except when they went into action and then the car had to follow directly behind the tanks. It had a very thick steel plate which dropped down in front of the windscreen with two small slits

cut in for visibility. One day in the desert the sand was so soft although they covered only 5 miles the speedo showed they had done 45 miles pushing through it.

After two months part of the 4<sup>th</sup> Armoured Brigade was sent from Alexandria to Malta where they were staying for a few days before moving on to Italy. The troops had gone on in a passenger ship but Alf along with the other drivers were to leave Malta on a liberty boat carrying the tanks and his armoured car. They were told that there was a submarine waiting outside the harbour for them but the navy had destroyers out racing back and forth and then they started dropping depth charges. Alf said you could feel the percussion effects on the liberty boat but fortunately they did not come into contact with the submarine. Although the troops landed in Taranto in southern Italy the liberty boat went to Bari as they had better handling facilities for the tanks. Alf had been learning the Italian language and was very pleased with himself when he was waiting for his armoured car and an Italian POW unloading a tank called out to another wharf worker "kome va" meaning "How are you doing" and Alf realized he meant are you ready to unload. He could understand some words of Italian. Of his total 4 years away he was to spend 12 months of it in Italy.

The tanks caught up with the infantry at Sangro where they encountered the Germans and their next action was to be at Castellaneta. There were 3 squadrons of Sherman and 1 squadron of Crusader tanks and Alf's was the only armoured car with maintenance personal. The Crusader tanks sometimes threw their tracks but although the Sherman tanks had controlled limited differentials they were top heavy and could be made to roll over. They also had recce cars used for reconnaissance work but they were not as heavily strengthened as Alf's car and were not attached to the tanks. After attacking over the Sangro river they moved up the Adriatic coast as far as Ancona when they had to return back down the coast due to the USA forces having made a landing on the other coast at Anzio and not being able to go further. Before taking Ancona Alf's mate Sherry had his tank hit and disabled. The tank had caught fire and as the tank commander was lifting Sherry through the turret it was hit by another shell that went around inside the tank and Sherry just went limp. The New Zealand forces crossed the mountain pass and then moved up the west coast until being stopped at Cassino.

Moving tanks through the narrow village roads was very difficult and in some cases the corners were taken off the houses as the tanks pushed their way through. In the evenings they would park the tanks in orchards and then rig up tarpaulins from the tank down to ground pegs to sleep under. In one orchard they parked under a big cherry tree and by standing on top of the tank they were able to pinch the cherries. One day Alf had to take a tank back to the workshops for repair but as he could not manoeuvre past a house he just leaned the tank into the corner, selected first gear and pushed. When he got to the workshop he realized the Browning machine gun was missing from the top so he borrowed a vehicle and returned to where he had taken the corner off the building and there on the ground was his machine gun. Another time he was taking a Sherman tank back to the workshops when on the road in front was a convoy of Canadian lorries. The New Zealanders had had enough of the Canadian drivers in their trucks pushing everyone out of the way so it was pay back time. Alf had the Sherman up to 30 mph and just drove flat out down the centre of the road. Canadian trucks disappeared into the ditches on both sides of the road. He said it made his day.

On arriving at Cassino they were held up a long time by German troops who were holed up in mountain caves and the monastery. At night they slept under the lean to tarpaulins beside the tanks while 1350 tons of bombs were dropped on the monastery as it was being used as an observation post. During the bombing the Germans would retreat into their caves and when it stopped they would come out and carry on fighting. Eventually after much fighting the Germans retreated from Cassino and there was so much rubble the tanks could not get through and had to go round.

When they had arrived at Cassino it was pointed out to Alf where the New Zealand cemetery was. At that stage it had 3 graves. When Alf left Cassino there were rows and rows of graves although Alf said it was not as big as the El Alamein cemetery.

After they were relieved at Cassino the Kiwi troops were allowed to use the portable showers that belonged to the U S A army. When the American troops used the showers they had a new uniform

waiting at the exit. The N Z troops for a little while were able to grab an American uniform especially the warm fleece jackets. After a while the Americans woke up to this and when the Kiwis exited the showers their old uniforms had been carried around and were waiting for them.

As the Germans retreated from Cassino they also left Rome which was declared an open city and there was no bombing there. The 18<sup>th</sup> Regiment followed the Germans who were fighting all the way back up Italy until they reached Arrezzo when Alf was due to come home. Alf had gone into Rome on leave and saw the Pope on the balcony at the Vatican. Alf's mates who were of Catholic religion had gone in earlier and they had been blessed by the Pope. At Arrezzo Alf was taken out of his armoured car and given a new Canadian Chev.4 x 4 truck to drive. He would take the other troops waiting to come home out to Lake Trasimeno where he would drive the truck into the middle of the shallow lake and they would dive off into the water. It was at Arrezzo that the troops found a vineyard with huge vats filled with wine. They simply turned the taps on and left them open while everyone filled jerry cans and what ever other containers they could find.

After leaving Arrezzo they were driven back down Italy to Bari where they had first landed their tanks. They were given tents and told to camp on the beach which was where Italian soldiers had been camped previously. Many of the troops caught crabs which had obviously bred in the sand from the Italians.

From Italy Alf travelled by ship to the main army camp at Suez and then on to Bombay. There were many refugee Polish children on the ship being sent to Wellington and Alf took great delight in helping look after these children. After Bombay they were put on an American troop ship which returned to Wellington via Perth. Arriving in Wellington Alf caught a train back to Auckland. Waiting for him at the station were his wife Anne, mother Ivy, sister Vida and Jim the son he had never seen.