

Biographical information

Growing up near Wakefield Kenneth Frater (Ken) received just seven years of formal education, leaving school to start work at age 13, not altogether uncommon during the global depression years. Noteworthy was his achievement of dux in the Nelson Province and 6th in New Zealand in the national standard six (form II) proficiency exam. In 1934, after two years working several menial jobs, he applied and was accepted for a 2 year cadetship at the Cawthron Scientific Institute in Nelson where he also undertook Technical College Night School studies. When the cadetship finished his lack of formal qualifications forced him back into run-of-the-mill work, this time dock loading and delivering 44 gallon drums of petrol to refill service station tanks as an employee of Coles Garage and Freight Services, Nelson, thereafter undertaking Coles Upper Moutere rural delivery mail run.

When he enlisted in the NZ Armed Forces in 1939 at age 20 he had already acquired his heavy duty driver's licence and that would set the scene for his predominant roles during WWII. He was in England in 1940 during the aerial Battle of Britain, trucking food and other supplies to various military units, all the while conscious of the drama occurring daily in the skies above as the German Luftwaffe tried and, ultimately, failed to defeat dogged British determination.

Commencing March of 1941 Ken was in Greece where his unit was assigned to erect supply dumps and truck supplies that included ammunition, petrol and food rations. Just six weeks later, under the weight of the German advance into Greece, they had to destroy their work as the Allied troops were forced to evacuate. Ken's lorry was one of many used to evacuate troops. Unluckily for him his lorry was used as a rear spotter to relay the progress of the German advance, thereby enabling the safe evacuation of the vast majority of allied troops across the Mediterranean Sea to Egypt. Unlike some 7,000 British, New Zealand and Australian troops who were captured by the Germans on April 30, 1941 near Greece's southern shores, Ken was among the last evacuated just hours before.

In Egypt and further west into Libya Ken continued driving supply lorries but it was while driving in a convoy of 25 lorries carrying some 500 German prisoners that he was a fortuitous participant in the capture of a further 14 Germans and 4 of their trucks. The Germans had hunkered down in a small depression when over a rise came the convoy. Quickly realising that they were outnumbered the Germans surrendered. This occurred in the region of Sidi Rezegh in Libya. The site: <https://www.sidirezegh.co.nz/Operation-Crusader-An-Overview/> provides enlightenment on a relatively little known operation in North Africa involving predominantly New Zealand troops, a key effort in securing the Allied troops advance westward toward Tobruk, culminating in Allied victory there on 10 December 1941.

A stint in Syria followed, where Ken's first job involved the 'beer run', transporting kegs from the Almaza Brewery to troops stationed in Beirut. By mid-1942 he was back in North Africa where, behind the El Alamein Allied defence line, his life's story almost ended. Having parked his lorry he, among others, headed toward the radio truck to listen to the 9pm news, noting the sound of planes overhead that they assumed were Allied aircraft. They were not. Bombs started raining down, killing 12 and wounding a similar number. Ken was briefly knocked unconscious, awakening to find that his eardrums had burst and that the sole had been sliced off his right boot.

Thereafter Ken's duties took him to Tobruk, Tripoli, as well as a brief, unsanctioned visit to Tunis after the German surrender in North Africa. He was finally sent home to NZ on furlough, arriving back in Nelson on 1st March 1944. Having achieved the rank of corporal, for him the war subsequently turned out to be over.

Ken's main occupations post-war were as joint owner/operator of the Thorpe General Store with his brother-in-law, Ron Fowler, where he also drove a large van as a mobile store, servicing the Dovedale, Orinoco, Woodstock, Baton and Stanley Brook communities. Late in 1957 he purchased a dairy farm in Golden Bay, northwest of Nelson. He sold the farm in 1970, semi-retiring to Motueka where he lived until his death in 2010.

Ken married Tressa Fowler of Thorpe and they had 6 children. As a family man he was very active in every community he lived in, serving in various presiding roles that included tennis, rugby, Federated Farmers, PTAs and Masonic Lodge. He played a leading role in obtaining from the NZ Government (through A&IDC) a fertilizer transport subsidy for isolated rural communities, an initiative that remained in place for some 20 years. While

presiding as chairman of the Takaka DHS PTA his concerns about the limited high school education available in Golden Bay (form 3 – 5 only) led to parliamentary representations that ultimately saw the granting of full (form 1 – 7) high school status in 1971.

In spite of his limited formal education Ken was a voracious reader. It prompted him to write his own memoirs in the early 1990s, thereby providing detail for this biography and also excerpts taken therefrom for inclusion in Dr Richard Begg's and Dr Peter Liddle's book, *For Five Shillings a Day*, a compilation of perspectives of New Zealand and British servicemen about their observations, actions and theatres of engagement during WWII [available at: <https://www.amazon.com/Five-Shillings-Day-Histories-Eyewitness-ebook/dp/B00GQV14TI>].